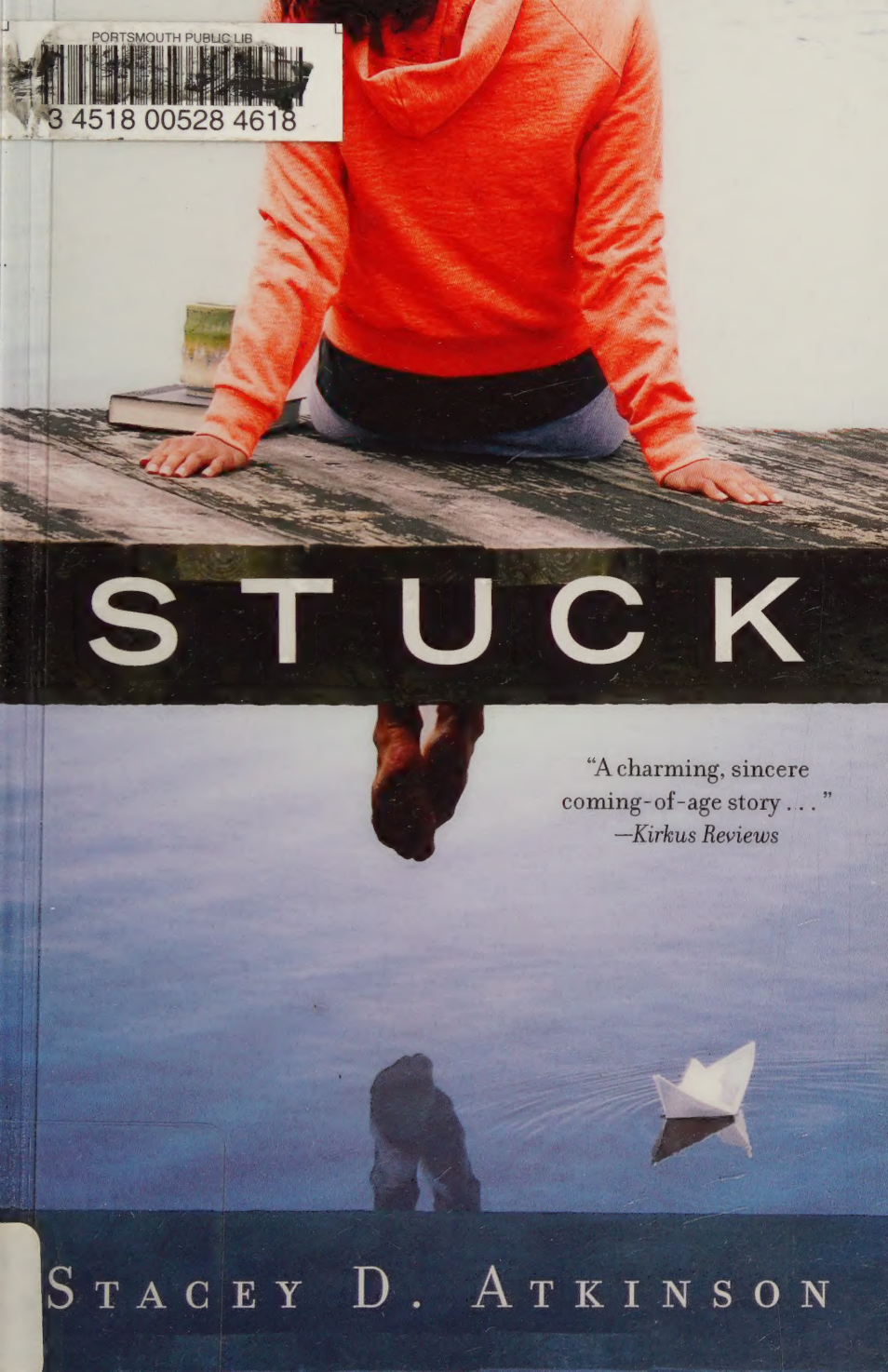


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STUCK

"A charming, sincere
coming-of-age story . . ."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

STACEY D. ATKINSON

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STUCK



Stacey D. Atkinson



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To small-town girls



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STUCK

Part I: July

stuck *adj.*

1 unable to progress

2 confined in a place

Routine

I dreamed I was alone on an ice floe out at sea. The fur-lined hood of my red parka gave me tunnel vision as I watched the reflection of the moon flutter on the skin of the water. The wind tugged at my hood, but I held it tightly under my chin so it wouldn't blow off.

Judging the distance between ice floes, I rushed forward and leapt over the water. When I landed on the other side, the ice rocked unsteadily back and forth, and I had to stretch out my arms for balance. I peered over the edge into the bottomless, black sea.

I considered my next move and quickly jumped again, this time only reaching the corner of the ice. I pushed back, dangerously close to the edge, and found myself on my hands and knees, panting from the excitement.

The sheets of ice had crossed the channel in the tide, moving together like puzzle pieces in the night. They glistened in the moonlight, revealing dead leaves and frozen bits of twigs picked up from Shediac Island. I could hear the ice colliding with the wharf pillars like slow-motion bumper cars.

A herd of white-tailed deer skittered by, their sharp hooves digging into the ice as they ran from a coyote chasing them off the island.

Qu'est-ce qu'il se passe?

Distracted, I miscalculated my next jump and plunged into the water like a tossed anchor. I grasped the side of the ice through my fingerless mittens but couldn't find a solid grip.

Underwater I went. My arm reached out around me to grab at something, anything for leverage. I stopped breathing, scared the water would flood my lungs. The panic triggered my heart to beat harder and made my eyeballs pulse.

In front of me was the underbelly of the ice, much bigger than its surface area. To the left, another floe glided straight toward me to deliver a silent, yet crushing impact. When it hit, I knew it should have hurt, but I felt no pain. Here I was, pinched between two massive chunks of ice, trapped and undoubtedly drowning.

Then I saw a light—an illumination burning so brightly ahead of me that I could see it through my closed eyelids. A warm glow filled the space around me and awakened my senses. The air smelled of brine and morning dew. I heard ocean waves breaking offshore and seagulls flying overhead, squawking their way to the wharf. The sand shifted underneath me as I pressed my back against the cool granite boulder.

My eyes opened to the sun rising like fire over the great, wide ocean. I rubbed my face with my hands and stretched out my legs, digging my bare heels in the sand.

It had been a long night. I must have fallen asleep on the beach. It was only a dream.

In my reverse world, the rising sun meant it was time to go home to bed. I stood up and gave one last look at the painted sky before walking home.

“Odette!”

Confused, I lifted my head from the pillow and looked around to see a room full of shadows.

“Wake up! It’s time for supper—or breakfast—or whatever,” Ma hollered from the kitchen down the hall.

I sat up and peered out the bedroom window. The sun was setting, which meant it was time to get up.

“Odette!”

“*J’arrive*,” I yelled back, swinging my legs out from under the

warm blankets and stretching my arms high above my head.

I pulled on my robe, tying the belt twice around my waist, and gathered my hair into a ponytail as I headed to the kitchen.

Ma was busy at the stove, jabbing the cast-iron pan with a broken spatula. I walked over to the table and pushed a mess of dirty glasses and coupon booklets out of the way, then emptied the ashtray full of lipstick-stained butts so I wouldn't have to smell it while I ate.

"What are we having?" I asked sleepily, resting my head in my hands.

"Caviar," Ma replied sarcastically.

I sniffed the buttery air and immediately recognized the menu: potato fish cakes with onions, pepper, and an extra helping of salt cod. Ma always said my love of salt must have come from my father's side of the family—the fishermen.

"Mmm, *ça sent bon*."

"Yah, well, don't get used to it. You and your sister are on your own tomorrow night."

No surprise—it was rare to have Ma cook for us at all these days.

I watched Ma flutter from sink to stove to fridge. She kept a cigarette pursed between her lips like a neurotic little bird that'd just caught a worm and couldn't quite figure out where to set it down. The smoke swirled around her head, adding a coppery tinge to her bleached hair. Her eyes were outlined in heavy blue mascara, and she wore her everyday outfit, *casual glam* as she called it: tight jeans, tall boots, rhinestone-studded belt, and a tucked-in T-shirt.

Ma was uncomfortable with domestic duties, plain and simple. She didn't know how to handle herself in the kitchen, and it didn't help that she never had an appetite. I was always telling her to slow down and eat something, but she preferred a coffee and a smoke—her recipe for keeping her nerves in balance. I swear Ma could pass for one of those malnourished African women except she was white.

Ma grew up in the nearby Acadian village of Memramcook, where she lived an uneventful life until the age of eighteen when her mother died of lung cancer and her father kicked her out of the house so his new girlfriend could move in.

Ma had just started dating Dad, so naturally she turned to him for help. They quickly married, and she dropped her last name, Cormier, to become Madame LeBlanc. It was a fiery relationship that might have worked out if it hadn't been for the murder.

One bitter night in January, Dad was drinking with his buddies at the tavern. Slouched at the bar was a miserable drunk with a vendetta to prove. He started heckling Dad about being the no-good black sheep of the Leblanc family, saying the only job he ever held down was the one given to him out of pity by his father.

Dad was never one for patience when he was drinking. So after his last swig of beer, he stood up, pressed the wrinkles out of his jeans with his free hand, and flung his beer bottle at the man's head. When the man reached up both hands to feel the gaping cut on his forehead, Dad lunged at him and pinned him against the bar. But the drunk was stronger than he appeared, and it was a struggle to hold him down. Then in a decision he would live to regret, Dad grabbed a plastic menu holder for the Tuesday-night wing special and pressed it against the man's throat, cutting off his air so he'd give up. But he pushed too hard, and the man later died from a crushed windpipe.

Dad was confined to the Dorchester Penitentiary, and Ma filed for divorce. She said she couldn't carry his sorry ass for the next seven years and needed someone who was going to provide for the family. She kept a steady stream of boyfriends, but no one ever stuck around for very long, especially once she brought them home to the trailer to meet her three girls.

I never visited Dad when he was in prison. It was better that way because I wouldn't have known how to be around him and lie that everything was all right. Everything was *definitely* not all right.

Left on her own, Ma basically fell apart. She smoked and

drank so much that her tongue turned white. She was bitter about how off-course her life had become. And so, faced with being destitute with three kids, she did the only thing she knew how to do: apply for welfare.

Ma spent most days pacing the floor and reading the daily horoscope, always searching for meaning in the ordinary, like seeing the face of Jesus in a grilled cheese sandwich. Then one day she went out with a friend for a coffee at Tim Hortons and noticed a new sign for the bingo hall. They decided to go in and give it a try, and after a few hours, Ma had her first real awakening. She realized her natural skill for working the cards—ink blotting up to twelve bingo sheets at a time in rows of three by four. At long last, she'd found something she was good at.

Having a Bingo Ma wasn't easy. There were days when we could only afford to eat plain spaghetti for supper, no sauce even. In the evenings my sisters and I would wait in the living room for Ma to return home from the hall to see if it was a Win Day. On these days we could buy whatever kind of chips and chocolate bars we wanted, even the expensive kinds like Toblerone. Ma would even promise to buy us each something nice from the Sears Wish Book. We'd fan out on the floor around last year's catalogue and fold down the corners on all the pages with the items we wanted.

We'd be on a delirious sugar high for a good week before realizing the money had run out. Then we'd be right back where we started, marking an *x* on the calendar to count down the days until the next welfare cheque arrived.

"What's with the sleeping in? You gettin' lazy on me?" Ma asked, as she scraped the burnt fish cakes from the bottom of the pan.

"I suppose I need to get to bed earlier," I said as a logical explanation, but I was only half-convincing myself. It felt more like a bout of apathy.

My younger sister, Sophie, appeared in the kitchen with a

piece of black liquorice hanging out of her mouth. She pulled out a chair from the table and sat down beside me.

“Ben, franchement, Sophie! I went to all this trouble to cook you a decent meal. You’d better eat it!” Ma hollered.

“Mais, c’est pas ma faute! I’m not used to eating this late,” she answered defiantly, stuffing the rest of the liquorice into her mouth.

“Écoute,” Ma said. “You know your sister has to sleep during the day to work the night shift, so suck it up. And now that she’s supervisor at the store, the extra money’s gonna really help out ’round here.”

“Whatever,” Sophie muttered with the full angst of a fifteen-year-old.

Sophie Ange, named by my father on the day after her birth after she almost died the night before in a breech delivery. The doctors performed an emergency caesarean and said the baby had been only minutes from death. Her dramatic entry into the world should have prepared us for what was to come. As she grew up, she demanded things be done her way, and if they weren’t, she had an amazing ability to hold her breath until she turned blue.

It suddenly struck me that Sophie was growing up fast—too fast. She went out with her friends every day and came home late each night. I’d hear Ma mumble under her breath, “God, I hope she keeps her wits about her,” but since Ma was hardly ever home herself, there wasn’t anyone to watch over her. Sophie was a beautiful girl, and that was the problem. She had our father’s dark Acadian features, with her long, black hair and blue eyes. She also hadn’t found a summer job yet, which meant she had *way* too much free time on her hands.

Ma served dinner, and we sat around the table pretending to be a normal family that always ate supper together. Ma complained about the new announcer down at the bingo hall, and Sophie mentioned something about a friend who had just gotten her nose pierced. Inevitably, though, the conversation veered toward my bittersweet promotion.

It was hard to believe that I'd been working at the same *Essentiels* convenience store since I graduated high school. Now at twenty-three, the years spent working there seemed like a slap in the face. I never pictured my life to be like this: sleeping all day, eating supper for breakfast, working the night shift for a few dollars above minimum wage, and still living with my mother. But then again, I'd never actually set out a specific plan to achieve my independence. I just fell in step with the routine of life.

But with the promotion came a restlessness. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, other than to say I wasn't entirely convinced I was where I was supposed to be. Ma kept telling me how lucky I was to have such a good job and that I could work my way up in the company, but I wasn't sure anymore that I wanted it.

My older sister, Natalie, had taken a very different path in life than mine. As the oldest sibling, she bore the brunt of our parents' divorce and was, accordingly, the most messed up by it. At the age of twenty-five she could already claim a failed marriage and three kids from three different fathers.

When we were young, I tried talking to her about school and moving away from our small town, but all she ever cared about were boys. Even now, she still complained about her boyfriend or how her landlord ought to be more flexible when collecting the rent. To get by, she lived on her monthly welfare cheque just like Ma and got paid under the table for a weekend shift here and there at the fish plant.

Although Ma never talked much about it, it must have been hard for her to be married and pregnant at nineteen. Then two years after that she had me, and eight years later, Sophie. My father always wanted a boy.

Sometimes I tried to imagine my parents when they were young and happy together. Even though the marriage self-destructed, I still had a few good memories of it. I remembered going to the Lobster Festival and how Natalie, Sophie, and I would run up to the ticket gate and Dad would pretend like he'd forgotten his wallet and we couldn't get in. He'd keep us on the edge of

anticipation, which made our entry into the carnival all the more satisfying.

We'd line up at the rigged games, attempting to throw darts at balloons tacked to the wall or toss coins onto the backs of plastic ducks floating in a tub of water. Then Dad would take over and win us a stuffed dog to share. We'd walk through the crowd, proudly displaying our prize, and stop to watch the stupid people in the dunk tank. Ma would let us eat cotton candy until our bellies ached, then we'd all go on the Mad Teacup ride and spin out of control until we threw up.

I remembered the sound of Ma and Dad laughing on Sunday afternoons as we walked along the beach, searching for pieces of beach glass smoothed over by the waves. When the tide went out, they'd send us kids off puddling in the shallows between sandbars while they drank beer and flirted with each other on the beach blanket.

Dad had a magnetic charm. He could draw us in close, making us think nothing could ever go wrong even when things were falling apart all around us. It was this proud, ambivalent nature of his that left him struggling his whole life to fit in.

Born Alan Joseph Leblanc, Dad was raised in a fishermen's family here in Pointe-du-Chêne. It was expected that he, too, would go out to sea one day, but that never came to pass.

When Dad was a young boy, he showed promise as a lobster fisherman—always eager to help Grand-papa mend the traps while his brothers and uncles prepared the boat for the next day's fishing trip. He never missed an afternoon down at the wharf, watching the men unload the catch from the bounty-heavy boat. He'd help his mother too, sharpening her pencil whenever it got dull from recording all the weights of the lobsters tossed on the scales.

By the time he grew up, Dad lost all interest in lobster fishing and wanted out. No longer did the boat and all its workings hold any mystery for him. The problem, however, was that he didn't have a credible backup plan, so he just fell into a discouraging

routine. Each summer he'd work for Grand-papa on the boat and in the winter sign up for employment insurance cheques. During these off months, he'd sit around the living room drinking beer and watching the Shopping Channel, trying to invent the next million-dollar idea.

Raising a family of three girls was expensive, and Dad had become desperate for money. He believed wealth bought happiness, and I encouraged him. Every night before going to bed, I wished for him to make a windfall of cash so we could move out of the trailer into a big house with space for me to have my own bedroom and a backyard with a tire swing.

Dad was determined to be somebody, to make a name for himself outside of the family business. But by the time the lobster season came back around each summer, all he had to show for himself was a book of ill-conceived product sketches and no savings to prototype any of them. Once again, he'd have no choice but to join the boat crew for the summer.

Dad was forty years old when he was finally released from prison for the murder that night at the bar. He had deeper frown lines, and his thick, black hair was starting to turn grey.

His parole officer arranged for him to be set up in a bachelor apartment in downtown Shediac and helped enrol him in a long-haul trucking course. By the end of his first year as a free man, Dad was hired on full-time with a trucking company and started driving day trips to Charlottetown and Saint John. As it turned out, he was a pretty reliable employee and eventually moved on to the long-distance hauls that took him all across the country.

I saw Dad from time to time, but life had hardened him. He wasn't big on conversation, and I felt like whenever I was with him he'd rather be somewhere else. I liked to think it was because he never learned how to relate to me as a daughter, seeing as he was away in prison for so long. Or maybe he just didn't have anything to say to me.

I used to get so mad at him for leaving me and my sisters behind. But as I grew older, I realized he'd been pacing the cage the

whole time, just waiting to make his escape. Now he was finally free running the Trans-Canada Highway, or maybe he was chasing it. Either way, I empathized with him. There were days when I, too, felt so stuck in this town that I didn't think I'd ever get out.

Luckily for me, Grand-papa was there to fill in all the missing pieces in my life. He was my best friend, and I loved him more than anyone. I spent many nights falling asleep in his arms on the couch, waiting for Ma to come get me and my sisters after a late night out. He was wise and strong and had all the answers to my questions. He used to say I was like the navigational North Star because I burned the brightest.

Grand-papa and I used to go for long walks together on the wharf, and he'd ask me about what I'd done at school that day. I never wanted to disappoint him, so I'd tell him stories about stomping ant hills with my best friend, Anne, during lunch break, then recite facts I'd learned in history class. He, in turn, would talk about the characteristics of the boats tied up along the wharf and explain the migration of lobsters.

I spent almost every day of my life with Grand-papa until he died suddenly two years ago from a brain aneurysm. Now, without him, I felt desperately lost. When Grand-papa left the earth, a piece of me left, too. I couldn't find the confidence I once had to tackle problems thrown at me. I still found myself wanting to call him for advice, to hear him tell me he believed in me.

I remembered being at the funeral and staring at the framed photograph placed so carefully on top of the casket. It was a picture of him waving from the deck of his lobster boat and a younger version of me holding on to his leg. I felt a surge of panic then as I realized that from this point on, I was on my own.

I admired Grand-papa for the way he lived his life. He loved being a lobster fisherman and yearned every day to be out at sea, blaming it on the salt in his veins. Even as the years of cold, wet weather turned good hands into crippling arthritis, he still captained the boat whenever he could, refusing to surrender his sea legs until the day they laid him in his coffin.

After the funeral I began to feel numb, caring less about a lot of things, including work. I slipped into a mindless routine, never bringing my feelings to the surface. Afraid I'd be unable to cope if I did.

Ma was still prattling on about my promotion as I ate the last bite of fish cake, but I wasn't listening anymore. I got up from the table and brought the dishes to the sink, running hot water over them while I quickly scrubbed them clean. Then I placed them on a rack to air dry, wishing we had a dishwasher, but that was a luxury we never could afford.

At least we had a place to live, for which I was grateful. I remembered celebrating with Ma the day she finally paid off the modest mortgage on the trailer after years of sporadic payments from her bingo winnings. Somehow she'd struck a deal with the bank manager, and who were we kids to care how she'd done it. We just wanted to dance around the kitchen, banging pots and pans to songs on the AM radio.

That same night, Ma went out to celebrate with friends. Sophie and I waited up for her, thinking she was out buying chocolate bars like on a Win Day, but we eventually fell asleep on the couch. We woke at sunrise to the sound of her key scraping against the lock and watched her come in drunk and empty-handed, except for the bank manager on her arm.

Even though we now owned the trailer, we still didn't own the land and never would. It was leased to us by the church, just like most properties around here. Ma always said we were the luckiest family because if we ever had to leave, we could just put our home on wheels and take it with us. I pictured Dad hooking up our trailer to the back of his long-haul truck and driving us down the highway all the way to Toronto to start a new life. I figured there were lots of interesting things to see and do in a big city like that.

The only problem with the trailer was that it was too small, forcing unused household items to spill onto the front porch and

around the perimeter of the property. Inside, the rooms were cluttered and overrun by knick-knackery, piles of newspapers and unopened mail on the kitchen table, stacks of DVDs on the floor that Ma kept bringing home from the discount bin at the grocery store, and a stock of Pepsi bottles lined up beside the fridge.

The decor of the trailer was another matter altogether. We still had the original shag carpet in the living room framed by faux-wood panelling—a space that left you wanting for sunlight. The couch was covered with a quilted blanket to hide the fabric tears made by the cat years ago, and the end tables didn't match.

In the kitchen, the faded orange and black linoleum was far past its prime. When I was four years old, my older sister, Natalie, and I had put all our weight against the fridge to move it by a couple of centimetres to retrieve a lost marble, but it'd resulted in the metal legs ripping right through the flooring. Years later, the tear formed a stiff curl along the base of the fridge that caught unsuspecting toes.

The lone bathroom down the hall was functional but cramped because of the hot water tank taking up so much space beside the shower. The lavender sink, toilet, and tub definitely dated the place, but we opted to simply enhance their character by hanging a white shower curtain dotted with purple fish.

The bedrooms were tight little spaces lined up along the side and rear of the trailer, wallpapered with a floral print to give some reprieve from the wood panelling underneath. Ma said if we waited long enough, the colours would come back in style and we wouldn't need to update a thing. She said the same rule applied to the clothes in your wardrobe, for which I had to admit she had a point.

As for my bedroom, I used to share it with Natalie until she moved out when she turned eighteen. That's when I should have been making plans for my own escape, but instead I redecorated. I found an old, wooden desk on the side of the road and had Anne help me carry it inside to my room. I pushed it up against the wall where my sister's bed used to be, and above it I hung a poster of

the world map.

When I was thirteen, Anne and I were at her house flipping through an issue of *National Geographic* that she had stolen from the school library. It wasn't like Anne to steal, but she'd forgotten about a report due the next day and so, in an act of desperation, made the decision to smuggle the magazine home as research for her paper with the full intent of returning it the next day.

I had never before seen such beautiful images—a family of Silverback gorillas lounging in a lush treetop, excavated gravesites and Buddhist temples in Laos, enormous rainforest trees surrounded by giant ferns growing wildly on the forest floor. I could hardly believe such exotic places existed on earth.

We flipped through the pages, pretending to be world travelers who photographed lost tribes. Then a world map slipped out from the back cover, and I claimed it as soon as I saw it, not caring whether or not the librarian noticed it missing. One side showed the countries based on political boundaries, and the other side showed the geographic aspects like river valleys and mountain ranges. I took the map home and used the refund money from returning Ma's gin bottles to have it laminated, and then I stuck it to the wall with chewed bubble gum.

Over the years, I stared at that map each night before going to bed, wondering what people on the other side of the world were doing at that very moment. But now, I barely noticed it at all. Somehow I'd lost sight of my childhood dream, much like the faded blotches on the poster where the sun touched it every morning through my window, slowly erasing the colours.

Ma's impromptu fish-cake meal had made me late for work so I rushed to my room to get ready. I rummaged through the closet until I found an outfit and quickly dressed in a pair of navy cords and a short-sleeved blouse. I ran a comb through my tangled hair and decided it was definitely a hair-up day, and then massaged a fragrant cream into my cheeks, adding some loose powder, blush,

and a touch of mascara. Even with makeup on, my freckles dominated my face and brought out the brown in my hazel eyes.

This was me, Odette Loretta-Lynn LeBlanc, named after my parents' devotion for country music. Ma always said I had the brains in the family because I read books all the time in my bedroom. Even at the store, when my work was done and there weren't any customers around, I relieved my boredom by reading the *Globe and Mail* and *MacLean's*.

The rest of the time I'd flip through fashion magazines from which I managed to pick up a pretty good sense of style. I knew you needed certain standard items in your closet and to *always* wear a belt and good shoes. You could tell a lot about a person by what they wore on their feet. I'd also taken to shopping at Frenchys second-hand clothing store, just for the thrill of finding that perfect one-of-a-kind item at a bargain price and then making a few minor adjustments to it on Ma's sewing machine.

I grabbed my work apron from the hook on the back of the bedroom door and shoved it in my purse as I headed down the hall to the kitchen. Then I rinsed out my travel mug, collected my keys from the window ledge, and flicked on the porch light as I walked out the door—a door I had opened and closed a thousand times before.

A pillow of warm evening air pressed against my face, rich with the smell of sun-dried kelp. I walked down Oceanview Lane, an ironic name given that I couldn't actually see the ocean from where I lived. I turned the corner and followed the dusty road past older homes slanted from age and the Atlantic wind, while heavy-limbed oaks formed canopies over the front porches.

Besides the trailer park and the fishermen's homes, the rest of the village was a thriving cottage community, full of people who celebrated the summer months. The cottage lawns were ornamented with miniature lobster traps and driftwood sculptures in the likenesses of knobby-kneed seagulls and sea monsters. Hand-made seashell chimes rang from porch rafters, while strings of lights threaded through railings illuminated the laneways.

As evening set in, neighbours settled into porch chairs to sip tea and smoke cigarettes, the chatter of the nightly news escaping from the open windows. Children's wet bathing suits hung on clotheslines to dry, swaying gently in the breeze. A gaggle of kids rode by on their bicycles, with glass jars tucked under their arms for trapping fireflies.

I greeted Madame Landry as I walked by her porch, thinking how easily she could pass for the old maid in *La Sagouine*. The neighbourhood golden retriever ran up to me for his evening rub behind the ears. All this familiarity. I wondered if the neighbours saw my routine in the same way that I saw theirs—like a predictable pulse on a heartbeat monitor with no major ups, no major downs.

This was my life in Pointe-du-Chêne, or “The Point” as the locals called it. It was the meeting point for unloading the fishing boats at the wharf, the point where the lighthouse lamp beamed out across the channel to guide the boats home, the point where the road ended and the sea began.

Store

*B*ing bong.

“*Salut, Aline,*” I said as I entered the store.

“*Bonjour, la petite,*” Aline Moussa called out from behind the cash.

“Busy tonight?”

“A little bit,” she said as she placed lottery scratch tickets into neat piles.

I passed the rainbow display of gum and chocolate bars on my way to the coffee counter and filled my travel mug with a hazelnut blend. Then I navigated around stacked cases of water bottles to get to the staff room to drop my purse in my locker.

As I was about to open the back door, Aline called out, “*Es-tu prête?*”

“Ready for what?” I asked, as I swung open the door and saw my co-workers sitting around the lunch table while our boss, Ronald, stood lecturing them with a pen.

“Good, now you’re all here,” he said gruffly. “Everyone out to the front for a demo on the new slushie machine.”

As if on cue, the small group marched past me like a flock of sheep, and I dutifully followed behind them. Aline finished up with a customer at the cash, then joined us at the slushie machine, which had been wedged between the hot dog rotisserie and the Pepsi cooler.

I took a sip from my coffee and waited for the show.

Ronald approached the machine slowly, then spun around

like a circus master preparing for his monologue to the crowd.

"Okay, listen up, and listen good," he said. "I don't wanna be here all night 'cause me and the wife got some business to take care of back at the house, you know what I'm saying?" he said, vigorously pumping his eyebrows up and down.

I looked over at Aline, who stood stoically in place, but I couldn't help rolling my eyes and thinking *pas de classe*.

"This is an expensive machine so rule number one: Don't break it!" he said, slapping his hand on the lid, causing the neon liquid to slosh around inside the glass box.

"It only makes two flavours, so even a moron like Ted can figure it out," he said, leaving my co-worker looking rather deflated.

"The red stuff is Berry Bonanza, and the blue is Atomic Ice. Here at the back is the on/off switch. Remember to only switch it on after you've..."

Ronald continued talking, but I tuned him out. He was a mystery to me, a sort of outlier. I couldn't understand how someone so greasy could be one of the town's wealthiest businessmen. His hair was dyed black and swept across his forehead to hide his crowning bald spot. He wore his shirt open by two too many buttons, exposing a mess of curly chest hair entangled with a gold-link chain. His belly was like a hard-boiled egg sitting atop two pencil legs.

"...and I don't want any of you offering freebees to the customers, even if she does have big..." Ronald said, gesturing to his chest with his hands. He looked over at Ted, who stood leaning to one side, his long hair falling across his face.

"You hear me?" Ronald said, pointing his pen in Ted's face.

Ted nodded.

"I got my eye on you," he said menacingly.

Ted looked like he wanted to say something but held back.

A half hour later, the training was over, and everyone had left the store except for me and Aline. In the summer months, we worked two at a time so one person could serve the customers while the other restocked the shelves left barren by a cyclone of

daytime tourists.

I always liked working with Aline. She was easy to talk to, and it made the time go by fast. If we got bored, I'd ask her to tell me more stories about her life back in Lebanon.

"Why the frown, little one?" she asked when she noticed me staring out the window.

"I think I've had a little too much of boss man Ronald. He seems to be missing a sensitivity gene, don't you think? Can you believe that guy...and what's with that hair?"

Aline smiled politely and sighed. "I know, I know," she said. "But remember—he does best he can. He is only a man trying to make his way in this world."

"Um—right," I said, a little taken aback. But of course, that was Aline, always thinking of others first.

She reached under the counter and pulled out a plastic food container, then peeled off the lid to reveal her specialty—home-made baklava pastries.

"I brought in something for us to celebrate your new promotion," she said happily.

"Oh, you shouldn't have," I said, staring at the pastries, "but I'm so glad you did."

I dug into the sticky treats and ate three squares before I even realized it. I chased the last bite with a gulp of coffee and told Aline to hide the rest so I wouldn't eat anymore.

"So?" she said, as she placed the lid back on the container.

"So what?"

"So—what do you want me to do?" she asked, smiling at me until I caught on to her little game.

"Oh, I get it. Now that I'm supervisor I need to *assign* you work to do?" I said playfully.

"Yes, I think it is most appropriate this way."

"All right, then," I said authoritatively. "How about cleaning the toilet?"

"No," she said emphatically and shook her head.

I made a face like her disobedience shocked me but then had

to bite my lip to keep from laughing. "Okay. How about resetting the mouse traps in the stockroom?"

"No, no, no. This is not good," she said.

I paused dramatically as if I was thinking of something far worse for her to do, then finally gave up and said, "Chip aisle?"

"Perfect! I do it now," she said and headed to the back room.

Aline walked with one hand on her hip while shaking her plump rump from side to side, mimicking a runway model. I admired how she could show up for work every day with a smile on her face even when I knew she had anything but an easy life.

Aline and her family had left everything behind in Beirut six years ago to build a new life in Canada. Her kids were young during the move and had few problems adjusting, but Aline and her husband, Reem, had found it hard. The prosperous life they had imagined for themselves was far from the one they were living today.

Bing bong.

"*Salut, Odette.*"

"*Salut, Charles. Ça va?*"

"Good, dear...pack of Export A?"

"Sure thing," I said, reaching behind me to grab the cigarettes.

"How are things down at the plant?" I asked.

"*Pas mal*," he said, adjusting the front of his ball cap and letting some loose curls spill out.

"Oh, but you should see the giant *bleu* Danny caught the other day. *Oh là là*...she's a big one, weighin' in at 'bout fifteen kilos!"

"A blue lobster? Never seen a live one before—only heard about them."

"You should come down to the plant and check 'er out. We don't really know what to do with 'er so might just keep 'er around and charge admission for a little look-see."

"Good idea," I said and rang in his order.

As he handed me the money to pay, he said, "Jeez, I almost

forgot to get my Lotto 6/49! Did I make it in time for the draw?"

"Sure, no problem, there's still time," I said, glancing over at the clock.

"*Ah ben*, that'd be just my luck to miss the one draw when my numbers come up."

He waved goodbye as he walked out the front door, and I watched him get into his truck, light a smoke, and then drive away.

In the meantime, Aline had dragged out a box of potato chips and was opening the taped seam with her fingernail. She stacked the new bags behind the older bags already on the shelf, taking care to ensure the labels faced forward—a superior display of product rotation. I couldn't help but think that if I was Aline and still working at this store when I was her age, I wouldn't be so nice to the merchandise. I'd probably use the snacks as tiny, air-filled punching bags.

"Aline?"

"*Oui.*"

"How are the kids?"

"Fine, thank you for asking," she said. "Houd and Arif are signed up for soccer which is very, very good. Boys need to run—too much energy. Also, with soccer you need no equipment, which is excellent for us. Alexandrine prefers to stay home with Mother and cook—also very good."

"Are sports expensive?" I asked.

"Yes! Figure skates and dresses—one thousand dollar. Hockey equipment for two boys—one thousand dollar. This is not possible for us. No, no, no. Not even with two salaries."

I grabbed the spray cleaner and used it to clean the fingerprints off the glass counter covering the lottery scratch tickets. It was a mindless task that helped pass the time.

Aline opened a second box of chips and arranged them on the shelf.

"Odette?"

"*Oui.*"

"When are your babies coming?" she asked innocently.

I stopped wiping the counter and stared at her. “*Not* gonna happen. I would need a boyfriend for that first.”

“All right, so when is husband coming?” she persisted.

“Aline, geez. You can’t rush these things. It’ll happen when it happens,” I said, slightly flustered.

“You know, most important thing in life is to have babies.”

“That’s debatable.”

“You are not getting any younger, Odette.”

I sighed and leaned on the counter. “Aline?”

“*Oui*.”

“Why did you move to Canada?”

“For my children, of course.”

Bing bong.

“*Allô, Odette.*”

“*Salut*, sis. What’s up?” I asked Sophie as she walked up to the cash.

She was with a boy with sun-bleached hair and shorts that hung low on his hips. He looked bored, standing with one hand in his pocket and the other holding a skateboard. I gave him the evil eye just for being in proximity to my sister.

“We came to pick up matches and Red Bull. There’s a bonfire on the beach tonight over in front of Gérard’s cottage,” she said.

“Since when do you drink Red Bull? You’re only fifteen—that stuff’s no good for you, you know,” I said sternly.

“Excuse me,” she replied sarcastically. “But I don’t think it’s any different than your ten cups of coffee a night.”

I glared at her, all the while thankful that my coffee mug was obscured by the roll of paper towel.

“Fine. Red Bull’s at the end of the first aisle, and the matches are with the stationery against the wall by the ATM machine.”

They hustled to the back of the store and returned with their supplies. I gave them both the silent treatment as I rang in the order, but Sophie just ignored me and stuck out her hand for the

change.

"See ya," she said on her way out the door.

"Have fun," I yelled out as a peace offering, but they were already gone.

The clock on the wall read 10:00 p.m., and I still had the whole night ahead of me. I needed a distraction, so I called Anne to see what her plans were for the weekend. She picked up the phone after the first ring.

"Allô, p'tit cul. How's work?"

"Oh, you know—the usual glamour and excitement. The Prince of Dubai just stopped in to propose to me. His yacht arrived at the sailing club this afternoon."

"Nice one!" she said, referring to our game of guessing who owned the yachts that arrived each summer during tourist season.

"Plans tonight?" I asked.

"Roger and I are on our way out the door to catch the late movie at the drive-in."

"Admit it—you're not going for the show. You just want a secluded place where you can grope each other."

"T'es jalouse?"

"Oui."

"Well, don't be. Someday you'll be fogging up car windows, too. You just haven't met the right guy yet. Or even the wrong guy. God, you're so picky. You need to loosen up."

"Yah, yah, I know. I get enough of a lecture about it at work. Listen—have fun, and I'll talk to you tomorrow. We still have plans for Margarita Monday, right?"

"I wouldn't miss it for the world. Hey—watch for me tonight, and make sure you wave. I'll get Roger to honk when we drive past the store. Gotta go—bye!"

"See ya."

I hung up the phone and stood at the counter, watching Aline tidy the store. She hummed while she worked, as if caught up in a daydream. She lifted the mat at the front entrance and shook it outside to release the layer of sand caught in the fibres. Then

she pushed a wide broom up and down the aisles and swept the mound of dirt into the garbage bin. I could see a trace of sweat forming above her lip as she brushed her thick, black hair off her forehead.

"Much better," she said, looking quite pleased.

Then we heard a bang on the front window and turned to see little Arif, Aline's youngest son, pressing his face against the glass to get his mother's attention. Aline's husband, Reem, and her two older kids, Alexandrine and Houd, followed behind him.

Aline's face lit up when she saw her family. She opened the door and gave Arif a big hug with three loud kisses on his cheek.

"*Allô, mon petit cœur*," she said affectionately.

"Papa brought us for a good-night kiss," Arif said with a smile minus his front teeth. He wore Spiderman pyjamas with blue cuffs that clung to his delicate wrists and ankles. His black hair was tousled in a way that hinted he'd already fallen asleep on the ride over.

"Papa had a good idea, didn't he?" she said, and Arif nodded.

"*Allô, Maman*," Alexandrine said, giving her mother a hug.

"*Allô*," Houd said, giving her a quick hug, then walked over to the magazine rack.

"*Bonsoir, Aline*," Reem said, leaning in and kissing his wife on the cheek.

"How was driving today?" Aline asked.

"Fine. Not many packages."

"Good, good. How were the kids? How was soccer?"

"Houd is a natural. Arif—not so much. He is still young," Reem said, grabbing Arif's cheek, which made his son giggle.

Reem was a handsome man with brown skin, black hair, and a trimmed beard. By the way he spoke to his wife and held Arif's hand, I could tell he was a good man. But the deep lines on his forehead revealed the stress of adjusting to his new life in Canada. Too many details had been lost in translation during the immigration process and he'd arrived to the news that none of his medical credentials were recognized, and neither was his wife's

engineering degree. Their names were put on a list for temporary employment, and they had access to social housing near the highway.

The family talked together for a few minutes, and I tried not to stare but couldn't help it. I contemplated how they would make a perfect museum exhibit: Modern-day *Homo sapiens* married with children.

It was bedtime for the kids, so Reem gathered them up from around the store to bring them home. Aline kissed each of them goodnight and held the door open as they left. She blew kisses to little Arif as the van pulled away.

Bing bong.

"*Salut, Odette.*"

"*Salut, Thérèse,*" I said to the plump woman waddling up to the counter.

"Just here for a couple bags of ice. We're having the Gaudet family reunion up at the cottage. 'Bout seventy-five people showed up, and the Labatt's gettin' warm. Can't have warm beer on a night like tonight," she howled.

"No, warm beer is never a good idea. What else you serving?"

"Oh, we got lobster tails and claws. Ma took all the bodies home 'cause she loves the green stuff. Then there's the quahogs and steamed mussels, *poutine râpée et fricot au poulet avec des crusty rolls.*"

My mouth watered as I imagined all the delicious food.

"Sounds like a feast," I said, taking the money she handed me and giving her back the change.

"*Oui, Madame!*" she said as she left the store.

I watched her walk over to the ice cooler at the front of the building and open the lid. She reached deep inside, and at one point her chubby feet lifted completely off the ground. I thought she might tumble in headfirst, but she eventually teetered upright again and pulled out the bags of ice.

As she was walking back to her truck, a car drove by honking its horn, and I caught a glimpse of Anne hanging out of the window, waving insanely at me. I gave her a peace sign with my fingers as I stood at the counter behind the cash like an altar.

Over the next few hours, Aline and I kept busy stocking shelves, reading magazines, and drinking coffee. Just another night, same as all the other nights at the store.

At 5:30 a.m., Tom, the day-shift supervisor, arrived, and I gave him the rundown of the night's activities along with the cash count. Then I grabbed my purse and the leftover baklava from my locker and bolted out the front door to freedom.

The morning air held a chill, like dew on a spiderweb. I pulled my hands inside my sleeves to keep warm as I crossed to the other side of the road. A dusty truck rumbled by—an early morning fisherman heading to his boat at the end of the wharf.

I followed the main road, listening to the oak leaves shuffling in the branches overhead. At the crossroad, instead of turning to go home, I took the laneway leading to the ocean. It had become a habit of late to walk along the beach after work. It was the best way I'd found to burn off my excess energy before retreating back to the trailer, where I had to tiptoe through the rooms, careful not to wake up Ma or Sophie.

I strolled down the laneway amongst the rows of quaint cottages lined up side by side like matchsticks. Family name plaques hung over the front entrances, while the screen doors puckered from the incoming and outgoing breeze, giving the illusion that the cottages were breathing. Strings of red and green patio lanterns left plugged-in overnight lit the way, illuminating rows of water shoes and beach towels hung over railings to dry. The front lawns resembled miniature theatre scenes bursting with props of marigolds, gnomes, and chipped buoys.

As I walked past the orderly cottages, I could only imagine what was happening on the inside, where everyone and every-

thing would be jostling for space. I pictured families squeezed into bunk beds, cots, and couches with only the whirring ceiling fans to cool their humid skin. Then there'd be suitcases lining the walls with an outpouring of clothes and shoes, cases of beer stacked beside the fridge, unfinished puzzles on the coffee table, and tomorrow's breakfast pastries laid out on the kitchen counter next to the fly swatter.

These cottages were mostly owned by locals, who used them for a few weeks each summer, then rented out the remaining days to families vacationing from all over the world. It created a weekly tourist migration that didn't go unnoticed in such a small village.

The most impressive of all the summer cottages were the extravagant homes built in the secluded area called The Bluff. These places had heated pools, tennis courts, and at least one luxury car parked in the driveway. Wealthy Americans caught on years ago to our cheap, beachfront property—a haven from their high-preserved jobs in New York and Boston.

At the end of the lane the dune grass feathered out to expose a small clearing below. I followed the dirt path down the slope to a boggy area where someone had made a makeshift bridge by laying a sheet of plywood across the mud. Moving quietly along the path, I tried not to disturb the nesting sandpipers as they waited for low tide to begin their morning forage.

Climbing up the bank, I arrived at the quiet end of the beach, far from the changing rooms, restaurant, and tourist shop selling suntan lotion and foam drink holders. I kicked off my shoes and socks and rolled up my pant legs. The cool sand, not yet warmed by the sun, was like a granular spa on my tired feet. The morning breeze skirted my ankles, giving me goosebumps.

I walked to the water's edge and dipped my toes into the frothy seafoam. The sand was peppered with seaweed bulbs that popped when I stepped on them and flat stones that massaged the arches of my feet.

I finally made it to my regular spot at the back of the beach, where a large granite boulder made for a comfortable backrest and

protected me from the wind. The sand was loose around the base of the rock. I sat down, buried my toes in the sand, and kneaded the grains between my fingertips. Then I shifted my weight from side to side, carving out an even seat for my bum in the sand.

For me, the beach was a place of solitude. When I took the time to focus on the expansive ocean and sky in front of me, it made me realize how insignificant my insecurities really were. It gave me perspective, which frankly I needed after being cooped up in the store all night. The beach had a way of subduing my anxieties about the future and offering a sense of calm for at least a few minutes each day.

I sat still for a long time, watching the sun break over the horizon, casting ribbons of fire over the rippling water. Even though I'd seen it countless times before, I was in awe of daybreak and how the sun and moon, as if guided by an invisible hand, worked together to do exactly as they should.

The faint sound of a motor cut through the air, and I squinted to see a crew loading traps onto a lobster boat. Next to them was the yacht club, where a man walked down the dock with a coffee in one hand and a toolbox in the other. A dog howled from a nearby cottage and was answered by another higher-pitched yelp. Over on a sandbar, two lone clam diggers approached each other with buckets and shovels, pants rolled up to their knees.

The beach was waking up—the spell broken.

The fishing boat finally came into view, passing about fifty metres from shore. The lobster season had opened only a few days ago and was now the preoccupation of every fisherman in town. I recognized the crew on the boat—Danny from high school and Jean-Marc, my neighbour—all eager for a good day's catch. I wanted to stand up and wave to them, but I stayed camouflaged against the rock.

The pulse of the new day's energy took full hold, and I knew it was time to go home. I put on my shoes and started walking to the other side of the beach to a laneway leading back to the trailer.

When I arrived home, I quietly entered the trailer and closed

the door behind me, setting my purse down on the table. Then I tiptoed around the kitchen to make a cheese sandwich and ate in front of the television, watching the weather report.

After a while, I felt tired enough to fall asleep, so I crept down the hall to the bathroom to brush my teeth and then back to my bedroom to get ready for bed. I changed into a T-shirt and crawled under the covers, reached for my earplugs on the side table, and strapped an eye mask around my head.

I lay there thinking about the summer. I'd spend most of it sleeping the days away and working nights at the store—the weary notion of it already leaving me feeling dejected.

Something's gotta give, I thought. I hoped.

I fell into a restless sleep.

Doryman

*B*ing bong.

I arrived at the store for my Saturday-night shift, but no one was there.

“*Allô?*” I called out as I placed my mug on the counter.

No answer.

I hadn’t bothered to check the schedule, but I had a feeling I was working with slacker Ted tonight. He was probably outside right now, sneaking a smoke behind the store. It flustered me to think how this was my problem to deal with now that I was his supervisor.

I opened the front door and called out Ted’s name, expecting to see him stick his head out from around the side of the building. But again, no answer.

A customer pulled into the parking lot, diverting my attention back to the store. I hurried to the back room so I could get ready to take over the cash, shoving my purse in the locker and tying my green apron around my waist.

Then suddenly, a door swung open behind me, catching me by surprise, and I slammed the locker door shut with a loud, metal clang.

I turned to see Ted standing in the bathroom doorway, backlit by a fluorescent light that framed his mane of hair like a halo. He looked amused at having scared me, and I bristled. All I could think of was how this was just another example of his half-assed work at the store and how he kept getting away with doing noth-

ing and still getting paid for it.

"Take it easy, Odette—no need to rip the door off the hinges," he said innocently.

The adrenaline from the scare made my words come out too jumpy. "How could you leave the front store unattended? What if someone had come in and robbed the place? You could get fired for something like that, you know."

Ted seemed stunned by my accusation. "I was just taking two minutes to relieve myself in the bathroom. I got rights."

"Yah, sure," I said, irritated.

He shook his head and walked back out to the front of the store. I started to follow behind him when I noticed the noisy bathroom fan on again. Why was it so hard for Ted to remember to shut it off? Was he so thick that he couldn't follow a simple instruction? I stuck my hand around the corner of the wall to flick off the switch when it hit me—the unmistakably pungent smell of weed.

As the night wore on, things settled down at the store, and I stayed by the cash, watching Ted pretend to work. He walked up and down the aisles, accomplishing nothing except for repositioning items that were already on the shelf. I thought of creative ways to deal with his insubordination, like giving him a pail of nickels and dimes to divide into coin rolls, enough counting to drive anyone mad. But for now I sent him to the storeroom for boxes of chocolate bars, making sure to keep an eye on him in case he had an uncontrollable urge to snack.

I kept busy filling out paperwork and cleaning up around the cash. I gathered an armful of unpurchased items left on the front counter and reshelfed them around the store where they belonged—customers always grabbed more than they could afford. They either didn't add up the prices while they shopped or they hoped I'd ring it in wrong. Either way, they'd stare intently at the register display until the total exceeded the lump of change

in their wallet, then they'd be faced with the decision of what to leave behind. Today's rejects were cereal, soup cans, and peanut butter.

The coffee counter had been neglected for a few hours, and I could see how the glass carafe now held only an acrid film. I brought it to the sink and scrubbed the black mire out of the bottom, then brewed a fresh pot of coffee. I replaced the empty milk carton, stir sticks, and plastic lids, then corralled the loose sugar granules to the edge of the counter so I could sweep them into the garbage bin.

Beside the counter was the hotdog rotisserie. Through its steamy window I examined the contents and thought it best to take immediate action. I opened the chamber door and used tongs to pull out the shrivelled tubes of meat and toss them into the bin. Then I picked out a new package of jumbo hotdogs from the cooler and refilled the rotating wire rack.

Finally, I emptied all the smaller garbage bins into a bigger bag and dragged it to the back room. I pressed the red button on the wall to activate the loading gate and the accordion door slowly chugged open, lifting in a steady rhythm as one metal slat consumed the next. Standing on the threshold of the doorway, I threw the bag outside into the dumpster then punched the button again to close the door.

On my way back to the front, I stopped and stared at the hand sanitizer mounted on the wall. I stuck my palm underneath it as a test, willing it not to work, to misfire. But in its predictable way, it gave a whirring sound and released a squirt of cool gel into the palm of my hand. I rubbed my fingers together, releasing the perfumed alcohol, breathing it in deeply to cut through the numbness.

Bing bong.

"Good evening, miss," said a kind-looking gentlemen.

"Good evening," I answered back.

He pulled a crumpled list from his pocket and asked hopefully, "You wouldn't happen to sell scissors, a writing pad, and flares?"

"Last aisle, next to the window."

"Excellent!" he said and went to gather the supplies.

The man returned to the cash and paid for the items, then nodded his thanks as he walked out the door. I sized him up as he was leaving, noticing his navy cap with the white lettering *Hunter 49*. He wore a windbreaker and khaki shorts with overloaded pockets, and leather deck shoes with white socks pulled to mid-calf. He'd obviously just come off a yacht. I watched him jog over to his car, likely a rental, then drive away down the road.

I glanced up at the trees across the parking lot and noticed the wind shifting direction, the branches beginning to stir. Rain's coming.

I started to daydream just as the aroma of fresh-brewed coffee woke me from my reverie. I went over to the counter and poured myself a cup while eyeing Ted, who was lingering suspiciously at the back of the bread aisle. The situation warranted a closer inspection, so I kept my eyes fixed on him as I approached, but he didn't even notice me. He was consumed in a magazine article with a picture of a small boy holding a gun and a caption: MOUNTING VIOLENCE IN AMERICA'S SCHOOLS.

I tapped him on the shoulder, but he stuck out his finger, signalling me to wait until he finished reading.

"Seriously?" I said.

He glanced up from the magazine and immediately read the irritation on my face. "Um—how about I take a break now—if that's cool with you? I'll just go outside for a smoke."

"First, tell me what you've done around here tonight?" I asked assertively, like a supervisor would do.

He surveyed the store, seemingly trying to remember his actions over the past few hours. "Over there, I stacked the chocolate bars like you asked me to do and..." he trailed off, sounding agitated.

Then I distinctly saw a flicker in his eye, like a challenge, and my gut warned me not to push him—not today. I felt a chill go down the back of my neck.

“Fine, take a break,” I said, giving in. “But before you come back inside, I want you to clean up the entrance. Put out more jugs of windshield washer fluid, and take a look in the ice cooler and tell me how many more bags we need to order. Got it?”

“Yah, I got it,” he said with vacant eyes.

At over six feet tall, Ted stood like a giant next to me. He turned and walked out the front door, shoulders slouched and feet weighted down by his army boots. His jeans were worn in the knees to soft threads, and his dress shirt hung on him like a wrinkled bedsheet. I watched him walk across the parking lot and disappear around the side of the building.

A car pulled into the parking lot, and I was relieved to see it was only my sister Natalie and the kids—a perfect distraction to take my mind off Ted for a while. She helped the girls out of their complicated car seats, and I held open the front door for them just as the rain began to spatter the pavement.

“*Salut les filles: Rosée, Nicole, et Stéphanie*,” I said.

“What? I don’t exist?” Natalie said, as she ushered the girls in out of the rain.

“And hello to you too, Nat,” I said with a smirk.

“That’s better,” she said. “Just finished a shift down at the plant, and now me and the girlyies are going home to watch a movie.”

“With popcorn!” piped up six-year-old Rosée. The other two girls—Nicole, four and Stéphanie, two and a half—giggled and clapped their hands with excitement.

“Yes, with popcorn,” Natalie reassured them.

Then she turned to me and said, “Watch them for a sec, will ya, while I get some cash out.”

She headed to the ATM at the back of the store while I helped the girls pick out a bag of popcorn and bring it up to the counter. I rang it through the cash, along with some bubble gum, and paid for it with the change I had in my apron.

“Hey, Nat?” I called out, as I knelt down to fix the girls’ crooked ponytails.

“What?” she answered.

“Have you noticed anything different about Sophie lately?”

“You mean, like, her puberty boobs?” she said, laughing, which made all three girls laugh, too.

“That’s not *exactly* what I meant, but it’s somewhat related. I mean, she’s getting to that age where all she cares about are boys. She stays out late at night and—”

“Okay, *Ma*,” she said sarcastically. “What’s the big deal, anyways? I was the same way when I was her age.”

Precisely, I thought. She’s turning out to be just like you—a struggling, single mom of three kids by three different fathers. I didn’t dare say this out loud and already felt the heat rising on my face. But Natalie was oblivious to it.

“Well, I just think we ought to both keep an eye on her is all,” I said. “She’s only fifteen.”

“Fine, but I think you got your panties all in a bunch for nothin,” Natalie said as she stuffed a few twenties into her wallet. “Come on, girlies, let’s skedaddle. Say *au revoir à tante Odette*.”

“*Au revoir, tante Odette*,” the girls echoed as Natalie herded them out the door.

I watched them as they sprinted to the car to escape the rain, quickly climbing into the seats and slamming the doors behind them. Then Natalie reversed onto the street and drove away.

It continued to rain, and I continued to serve late-night customers stopping in for cigarettes, rolling papers, and condoms.

5:30 a.m. My shift was finally over. I left the store and took a long-awaited breath of fresh air. With my chest fully expanded, I exhaled the evening smells of glass cleaner and paper money.

I followed the sound of droning waves along St. John Lane and admired the beginning of a pale tangerine sky reflected in the cottage windows. Hammocks hung heavy with the night’s

moisture, and water pooled on the seats of lawn chairs. Armfuls of white peonies leaned heavily to the side, their sodden petals drooping to the ground.

The laneway ended where the dirt path began. I navigated my way through the grass and across the plywood that covered the muddy part at the bottom and climbed the other side of the hill.

Up on the beach, the waves were unfolding one after the other all the way down the shoreline. The air was cool, and the sand moist. I walked to my spot in front of the granite boulder and laid my work apron on the damp sand so I could sit on it and stay dry. I hugged my legs close to my chest for warmth and settled in to watch the sunrise.

The wharf was buzzing with activity as men prepared their boats for a day of fishing. Generations of families worked together—the younger men doing the heavy lifting while the older men stood at the wheel, charting the course and testing the navigational instruments. It reminded me of Grand-papa and the stories he would tell me from his fishing days.

So much had changed in The Point over the years, like the new shops, restaurants, and so many tourists, but it seemed to me that the most profound transformation of all was in the fishermen themselves. The older generation of men, like Grand-papa, were true relics of the working class. They dressed in navy work pants and red flannel shirts with a permanent bulge in the front pocket from a cigarette pack. They worked slowly, methodically. Faces weathered like the cedar shingles on their trap sheds. Eyes fixed in concentration as they looked out past the wooden cross hanging from the captain's window, examining the temperament of the sea in anticipation for the day's voyage.

Conversely, the younger men moved quicker, with a determination to own the captain's chair far before their experience would allow. They were shaggier, louder, and talked about new methods to increase yields. These pushy conversations were tolerated by the older men only because these older men were their fathers, uncles, and grandfathers, who would one day pass down

the family business.

Despite their differences, the bond that brought them all together was an unwavering love for the sea. It was the lure of the big catch and the money they could bring home to their families that got the men out of bed each dawn and kept them working all day, hauling traps in the wind until their eyes filled with sweat and their arms went to jelly. Their job was to work for the words so carefully painted on the sides of their boats—names of wives, sons, and daughters—like the *Kevin Joan*.

I drew my arms tightly around my legs to ward off the morning chill. The security lights in the parking lot of the yacht club bathed a warm glow over the rows of anchored sailboats. The ocean was finicky this morning, causing the white hulls to bob up and down on the dark water like marshmallows in hot chocolate.

I spotted the small fleet of dinghies lined up at the main dock for the kids sailing program. A little farther out were rows of powerboats and daysailers. At the end of the line were the big cruiser yachts mostly owned by wealthy businessmen from Moncton or by Americans who sailed here for a summer holiday.

I'd been watching the comings and goings of these boats all my life. It was one of the games I used to play with Grand-papa when I was young. He had a deep understanding of boats and would test me on what I knew about the different models and how they were made.

I remembered one foggy morning, Grand-papa and I had gotten an early start to the day by going for a walk down to the wharf. Lobster season had just ended, and Grand-maman had forced him to take a day off to recuperate. We strolled together, hand in hand, down the pebbly road that ran through the back of town.

We walked to the far end of the wharf, where the boats were tied up. We stood in front of the diesel tanks next to piles of nets and coiled rope. This is where Grand-papa felt most at home.

He put his foot up on the greasy timber railing, and I did the same. We both peered over the edge of the wharf in search of a school of mackerel. But to my surprise, on the inside corner of the wharf was a little yellow dory.

I looked at its bellied-out sides and neatly stacked oars and thought it seemed rather small and out of place down there in the water. Grand-papa asked me what I thought of it, and I stared hard at the little boat as it lurched in the foot-high waves. I thought we were playing our guessing game, so I said it looked like the little six-footers made for kids so they could learn how to row. That's when he smiled and told me he'd made it for me with his own two hands. I could hardly believe it was true—my very own dory boat.

It turned out to be my birthday gift. He was the only one that year who remembered.

I wanted instantly to be near the boat, to climb over the splintery rail, descend the rusty ladder, and reach out my hand to touch the yellow-painted wood. But Grand-papa put a gentle hand on my shoulder and said he would ask Uncle Joe to haul the dory over to the rocks so I could try it out away from the wharf traffic.

That summer I learned how to handle the dory out on the water while Grand-papa yelled out instructions from shore. When I grew tired, I'd row back to the rocks and we'd find a patch of grass where we could rest and eat our corned beef and mustard sandwiches.

As we sat sunning ourselves, Grand-papa would tell me stories about dories. He'd built many of them during his days as a builder and said they were designed never to sink, only capsize. But even so, the code of the sea forbade two brothers to go out in the same dory for fear they'd both be lost at sea in a storm. He also told me stories from when he was a boy, but I had a hard time imagining him as anything but old and wise. He said the sea had made him tough over the years, and I believed him.

I couldn't even remember the last time I was out on the water. And what ever happened to my little dory? I think it lay buried under a tarp in the back of my uncle's garage.

Sitting on the beach, thinking about Grand-papa, and watching the men on the wharf made me feel like a curious child again. I studied the boats at the club until one in particular caught my attention. It was moored farther back and didn't seem to belong with the others. I stared at it to be sure, but its hull definitely had the shape of a fishing boat. Normally all of the lobster boats were anchored farther up the wharf. Everybody knew that the yachties and the fishermen didn't mingle.

I squinted to make out the boat's features and was convinced it was a fishing boat, or at least had started off that way. I'd heard about people refurbishing old sardine boats and turning them into yachts, but I'd never actually seen one done over before.

This boat was painted white with navy trim, except for the pilothouse near the back constructed out of stained wood. This navigation room appeared to be larger than usual, probably to accommodate more seating and charting equipment. Around the hull were portholes illuminated with interior light. The underbelly of the boat, where normally the fish would be kept, was probably converted into a sleeping berth with a small galley kitchen.

High up on the main mast flew a pirate flag. On the side of the boat hung an orange life ring next to the boat's registration number stenciled in large, black digits. The hand-painted name on the side of this boat read *Maine Voyage*.

I was concentrating so hard on the details of the boat that it startled me when a man emerged from below deck, holding a lantern. He scooped up a pale object under his arm, then went to the side ladder and stepped down into a red dory. He was probably getting an early start on the day by ferrying over to the sailing club to watch the morning news on the big-screen television before running errands in town.

The man began to row, propelling the dory forward at a slick pace. I lost sight of him as he maneuvered around the thick forest of yachts, but then he reappeared as he set a course parallel to shore. I became mesmerized with his rhythmic rowing and waited for the boat to veer toward the club. But instead, the man

rowed directly for the beach. I stayed hidden against the rock, listening to the oars dipping in the water.

The lantern positioned on the floor of the dory revealed a young man with brown hair and broad shoulders. His lean torso moved back and forth as he rowed the boat with steady determination.

As the boat drew nearer to the beach, the doryman tilted his head like he was listening for something. I stayed very still, hoping he hadn't noticed me sitting by the rock, not wanting to draw unneeded attention to myself. I watched him as he sat there, letting the waves lap against the boat while he gazed up at the sky as if admiring the fading constellations.

That's when I noticed the little white figure perched at the bow of the boat. It resembled the owl statues used by the downtown business owners to scare pigeons from the roofs. Only this figure suddenly moved and let out a distinctive *meow* as the boat lurched forward again.

The dory skimmed the shallow water and ran aground within a metre of dry sand. The little cat leapt skilfully to a dry patch, avoiding the water completely. The man swung his right foot into the water, then put his weight on either side of the boat to steady himself as he stood up. He stretched his arms high above his head and moved his shoulder blades up and down to work his tired muscles.

I felt like a voyeur. I knew I wasn't doing anything wrong because I was here first; still, I wondered if I ought to make a noise to at least announce my presence. Instead, I hugged my arms tightly around my legs and rested my chin on my knee, settling in to watch the show.

The doryman whistled to his dainty cat as she was making her way up the beach. She turned back and scampered to the edge of the water, trying to get closer to her human while not letting her fur get wet. She paced back and forth but couldn't get near enough to him, which made the doryman laugh. She meowed and scratched at the air until he walked out of the water, picked her up,

and rubbed under her chin. Then he placed her back down on the sand to let her run wild down the beach.

He turned his attention back to the dory and pulled it farther up the sand. Then he pulled off his T-shirt and tossed it on the seat, and proceeded to do the same with his shorts.

I cupped my hands over my mouth to keep a shriek from escaping. The doryman stood before me *completely* naked. Sure, he was still a fair distance away, and the dim morning light failed to illuminate his full form, but he was naked nonetheless.

I felt panicked but willed myself to wait it out and see what he'd do next. I wondered if he'd gotten undressed on purpose as a way of embarrassing me so I'd identify myself. But as I looked around, I realized it was still early, and there wasn't another soul in sight. He was probably just some guy who liked to wake at dawn to feel the raw elements on his skin. And if anyone could identify with that, it was me.

The doryman reached into the boat, grabbing a mask, snorkel, and mesh sack, then took four giant lunges into the waves and dove in—disappearing completely into the shadowy water.

Club

I dreamed I was floating on my back in shallow water. With my arms stretched out to my sides, my body took the shape of the holy cross. My clothes were wet and heavy, threatening to sink me entirely. It began to rain, and I blinked stiffly to keep the droplets out of my eyes. There was a shipwreck off to the right. A panel of charred wood floated by, and I almost didn't notice its stowaway—a white cat lounging comfortably on the board while cleaning her paw. She stopped licking and stared at me just as a man burst through the water, wearing a mask and snorkel. I couldn't see his face, but he was familiar.

Delicate water lilies bloomed all around me. I caught the scent of the petals...

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

I slammed the top of the alarm clock, then settled back in bed. The hair dryer was buzzing in Sophie's room, distributing the scent of her floral shampoo down the hallway. I rubbed my eyes and sighed, knowing it was my last night of work before my two days off.

I picked up the phone and dialled Anne's number.

"Allô, sexy," she answered.

"Hey."

"You just waking up?"

"Still lying in bed. Just need some motivation to get my butt to work."

"Well, just hurry up and get it over with already so we can go out tomorrow night. I haven't seen you all week, and I have so

much to tell you. You won't believe what Roger did last night—oh, and I got a lead on a job in town.”

I heard a car horn sound, and Anne shuffled the phone.

“Shit—gotta run. Roger's outside waiting for me. I'll fill you in tomorrow.”

“All right, tomorrow, then,” I said, but then added one last thing, “Listen, something kind of weird happened this morning at the beach. A doryman appeared out of nowhere—with a cat—then he dove into the water and disappeared.” I decided to leave out the naked part so that Anne would actually focus on my story.

“What are you talking about? Was this a dream?” she asked skeptically.

“No, it was *definitely* real but very strange. Whatever—no big deal. Just come over tomorrow night.”

“All right, see you then. *Salut*.”

“Bye.”

I dutifully got out of bed and wrapped my robe tightly around my waist. Halfway down the hall, I smelled cigarette smoke and heard country music playing on the radio by the stove. Ma was sitting at the kitchen table, reading the classified ads from a folded section of the newspaper.

“Anything good?” I asked sleepily.

Ma glanced up at me, then continued reading. “Big yard sale over on *rue Principale*.”

She was obsessed with old jewellery, especially broken chains that nobody wanted anymore. She'd buy them for next to nothing, then sell them at the pawnshop for the going price of gold.

I poured a glass of tap water and grabbed a handful of salt crackers from the open box on the counter.

Ma took a long drag from her cigarette, then butted it out in the horseshoe ashtray. She was dressed to go out, and the toe of her high-heeled boots tapped nervously under the table. She started to say something, but phlegm caught in her throat, and she coughed hard until it cleared.

“Rent's due,” she said finally.

I looked over at her, but she kept her eyes on the newspaper.

"Sure, first thing tomorrow," I said, setting down my glass on the sticky counter and retreating down the hall.

I gathered my things to take a shower and turned the faucet on all the way, feeling the soothing water wash over my fingers as it heated up. I couldn't stop my mind from shuffling through random thoughts and lists of things I had to do. And who was that doryman I saw on the beach? Where did he come from? I definitely had to find out more about him. I stepped into the shower and let the water splash over my face and clear my mind.

Back in my room, I stood at my dresser drawer, which normally contained neat rows of socks and underwear but was now thoroughly picked over since I hadn't done laundry in weeks. All I could find was a pair of grey socks with a sparkly cat face on the ankle and a black bathing suit bottom. It would have to do.

I slid on a pair of dark jeans, black belt, and a pink tank top with a white wraparound sweater. Then I applied some makeup and quickly blow-dried my long hair and braided it down my shoulder. I shoved my green apron unceremoniously into my purse and headed to the kitchen to assemble the rest of my work provisions: coffee mug, keys, and peanut butter sandwich.

I said goodbye to Ma, who was still absorbed with the newspaper, and headed out the screen door.

Bing bong.

When I entered the store, my co-worker, Laurent Mwenda, looked up at me with an emotionless face.

"*Bonsoir*, Laurent. It's been awhile."

"Yes," he said from behind the counter.

He sliced a knife across the plastic cord that bound together the new shipment of *Vogue*. Then he reached his long, dark fingers to the floor for another stack of magazines, and used a pencil to check off the quantities on the shipping invoice. At times, he seemed to take his job too seriously, performing each task in a

meticulous way as if he needed control over it.

Regardless of Laurent's arcane nature, I was still fond of him and his odd ways. He was a proud man, this I could tell by the way he carried himself—tall and straight, shoulders back—but he was a loner for reasons I didn't understand. He rarely shared anything personal about his life, which left me to piece together his story from what little I knew.

He was forty-two years old and had emigrated from the Congo in 1996. This much I knew because I saw his permanent residency information written on his job application. He didn't wear a wedding ring and never spoke of family except for a cousin he shared a small apartment with downtown.

He had only a few outfits, usually a white cotton shirt tucked into pleated dress pants, and his clothes were always neatly ironed. His shoes were polished to a high gloss, but couldn't quite conceal how the sole had separated from the leather around the toes.

Laurent continued his work, his dark eyes cast downward. He walked over to the aisle along the wall and arranged the new magazines on the shelf. I let him be and went to the staff room to get ready for my shift.

I eventually found an entertaining project to keep me busy at the front of the store. Using a steady hand, I stacked packages of toilet paper into a pyramid formation, then proceeded to do the same with tissue boxes.

As I was building the structures, I noticed a truck pull into the parking lot, and two men stepped out and began unloading poles and buckets. They brought the gear to the front window, and the taller of the two men saw me through the glass and looked at me expectantly. I nodded for him to continue, figuring Ronald had hired cleaners to remove the film of road dust from the windows.

The skinnier man with a paint-stained T-shirt disappeared around the side of the building to the utility tap and returned a few minutes later with a bucket of soapy water. He lit a smoke and

wedged it in his mouth before grabbing a dry squeegee and following behind the taller man, who soaped the windows. I watched the men work—lulled by their back and forth wiping—thinking that this could very well be the most exciting thing I would witness on my shift tonight.

That was until I walked up to the counter to get some tape and saw the register till open with all the cash exposed.

I stopped dead, not wanting to touch anything or get too close. A slow hammering turned in my chest as I retraced my steps, wondering if we'd been robbed.

I scrutinized the till again, leaning toward it like it might speak to me. The bills were stacked neatly in their slots, making it highly unlikely that someone had entered the store unnoticed, opened the cash, and grabbed only a handful of coins. I reached in and quickly counted the bills. The amount was within range, so if any money was missing, it was negligible.

I heard Laurent behind me, dragging a box across the floor, and I called him over to the counter. As he approached me, I searched his impassive face.

"Laurent, the register was left open," I said, pointing to the till. "Was this you?"

He studied the scene, examining the buttons on the front of the cash register all the way to the plastic slots where the bills and coins fit in. He shook his head and placed his palms over his eyes, his long fingers fanning across his forehead. His shirt cuffs fell back to reveal scars around his wrists, where the skin had grown back a fleshy pink.

"It was me. I did this," he said in a defeated voice. "Please tell me...is money missing?"

"No, I don't think so," I said hesitantly. "You're lucky, though. I don't think anyone's been in the store since you left it open. This is still serious, Laurent. If money goes missing during your shift and it's your fault, you have to pay it back or you get fired. You know how Ronald works."

"I know. I am tired—it is hard to concentrate."

Laurent looked crushed, and I felt sorry for him. He obviously didn't mean to cause problems at the store.

"Didn't sleep well last night?" I asked, not expecting any kind of answer from him.

"No," he said flatly.

I waited for him to go on, but when he offered no further explanation, I moved toward the register to close it.

"Night terrors," he said in a matter-of-fact voice.

I bit at my lower lip, not sure what to say. "Oh, I see."

"I sleepwalk. Leave my bed at night and bury objects in the backyard. I know this because I wake with dirt under my fingernails."

We stood quietly, both staring at the cash and not at each other. Laurent had never spoken so much to me at one time, and his words were unsettling. I felt uncomfortable and shifted my weight.

"Maybe you should try chamomile tea?" I blurted out, then rolled my eyes at how stupid it sounded.

Laurent didn't hear me. Rather, he seemed locked in a memory. "*Je suis hanté*," he whispered.

He looked down at his hands, then to the place where the scars were concealed under his shirt cuffs. I looked at his hands too, wondering what story they had to tell. The nails scrubbed clean, but still chipped and broken.

Finally, I stood a little straighter and cleared my throat. "I won't report this incident because I know you didn't mean to do it and you normally don't make mistakes. But from now on, please pay more attention to what you're doing when you work the cash. All right?"

He looked at me with dark eyes. "Thank you."

The phone rang and broke the tension between us. Laurent answered the call, then held out the receiver for me to take. My hand grazed his long fingers, and they felt as cold as stone.

"*Allô?*"

"Listen, Odette, the cash was short last night by a hundred

bucks. You know anything about that?" Ronald asked.

I looked over at Laurent. "That doesn't sound right. I counted it myself and everything added up," I said, feeling my face getting warm.

"That's not the problem. Your count was right, but it didn't match the register report. There's money missing. Who worked with you last night?"

"Ted," I said, and we let his name hang in the air for a few seconds.

"Goddammit...I'm gonna watch the security tapes and figure out what's going on."

Ronald hung up the phone and left me standing with the receiver still held to my ear. I looked up at the surveillance camera pointing directly at the cash counter.

"What is it?" Laurent asked.

"Nothing—don't worry about it," I said and hung up the phone.

Bing bong.

A short woman wearing pyjama bottoms and a pink hoodie entered the store and went straight to the cooler for a four-litre bag of milk. She trudged up to the cash, carrying the heavy bag, her hair messy as if she'd just gotten up from the couch to do this one last errand before bed. She muttered something about her kids, and Laurent served her with an unsympathetic ear.

As the night wore on, we saw fewer customers. I read the new *Vogue*, and Laurent concentrated on a French crossword puzzle. The end of the shift passed with little event as we waited for sunrise.

It had been hours since my conversation with Laurent about his sleepless nights, but I couldn't stop thinking about him. How did a man who grew up in a landlocked country in Africa end up

moving to Shediac—the Lobster Capital of the World? Maybe it was the giant lobster sculpture at the town's entrance that impressed outsiders so much, or the colossal chicken outside of Mr. Banjo's restaurant.

By the time I reached my spot on the beach, I was tired of thinking. I slumped down on the sand and leaned my head against the big rock, gazing up at the pinholes of starlight fading into dawn. I was anchored to the earth by gravity, but yearned to let go and tumble upward, freefalling into the sky as the earth turned on its axis. I sat there enjoying the vertigo until the entire beach was bathed in the new day's sun.

Then I heard it—splashing water.

Out in the waves, I saw the doryman rowing toward the beach with his little white captain in position at the bow. When the red dory glided onto dry sand, the cat leapt out of the boat and ran fanatically up and down the beach as if she'd been waiting hours to stretch her little legs.

Just as he'd done the night before, the doryman stood up and stretched, stripped off his clothes, and dove into the water. When he finally surfaced, I kept track of him until he swam farther out into the waves, and then there was only the sound of him clearing water from his snorkel.

I knew I should leave, just like I did the first morning when I saw him. I didn't want to be caught sitting by the rock when the sunlight poured over the beach and exposed my camouflage. He would think I was spying on him, which in a way was true. Although, technically, I had arrived at the beach first, which made the spying inconsequential. I decided in the end to just sit still, be quiet, and watch the cat.

The impish animal ran up and down the beach, stopping only to perform spastic sideways jumps to repel the water. I laughed at the sudden acrobatics, but then muffled my mouth with my hands so as not to make any noise. She returned to the boat and stood at attention, searching for her human out in the water. Then she let out a pathetic meow and lay down on the sand with her head

resting on her paws.

She looked so pitiable that I couldn't resist calling out to her to draw her up the beach. Her ears perked up, and she tilted her head to the left, but she couldn't figure out exactly where I was. I called to her again and snapped my fingers until she turned and detected me. She stole one last glance at the water, then put her full attention on me.

In a crouching-tiger movement she advanced, stopping only to sniff the air, then continue on. Now, only a couple of metres away, I could see she was very small, all fur and dirty paws, long white whiskers, and a bushy tail that pointed straight up in the air.

I held out my right hand, palm side up, and wiggled my fingers. Cautiously, she made her final approach and rubbed her temple against my thumb. I scratched under her chin and on top of her head between the ears. She purred loudly and rubbed up against my leg affectionately. I had won her over completely. She sniffed curiously at my shoes and purse while I petted her soft back, all the way up her tail. She seemed content to stay with me until we both heard splashing water, and she bolted back down to the beach toward the dory.

The doryman returned from his swim, looking tired and out of breath. He pulled off his mask and snorkel, then sat at the edge of the water, letting the waves wash over his legs. He held the mesh sack in his hand, and I was curious about what he had collected inside it, but I was too far away to tell.

After a few minutes, he dumped his things into the dory and dressed in his T-shirt and shorts. Then he took a seat, called out to his white captain, who dutifully jumped in with him, and cast off toward the converted sailboat.

When he was far enough away, I decided to follow him. I kept pace along the back of the beach as he rowed parallel to shore. I watched him as he worked his way around the yachts until finally reaching his outlying boat. He tethered his dory to the stern, and then ascended the ladder with the cat under one arm and his mesh bag and lantern hanging from the other. A few seconds

later, he disappeared below deck.

When I finally took my eyes off him, I realized just how far I had walked. I was at the end of the beach, standing just below the parking lot of the yacht club. I climbed up the small embankment and crossed over the cool pavement. Although the sign on the building read *Members Only*, there wasn't anyone in sight, so I didn't see the harm in walking around.

The yacht club was a place I really didn't know much about. I'd only ever walked past it on my way to the other side of the wharf, where Grand-papa used to moor his lobster boat. The club building was beige with white trim and French doors at the entrance. On the side that faced the water, it had a wide patio filled with rattan tables and chairs, wide umbrellas, and potted palms. Beyond the building was a long dock that intersected rows of sailboats leading out toward the breakwater.

I stood on the dock, admiring the boats, just like I used to do with Grand-papa on the wharf. It was a quiet and peaceful morning, with only the occasional seagull call to break the calm. I felt the sun heating up the day, and it reminded me just how tired I was. Time to go home to bed.

As I walked past the club, I heard a noise near the back entrance, and I looked over to see an old man pushing a mop bucket out the door. He looked up at me and smiled.

"*Bon matin, Monsieur.* You're here awfully early?"

"Been here for hours already. Start my shift nice and early so I can be outta here when the afternoon humidity hits. If you haven't already noticed, I'm the janitor," he said, gesturing to the mop.

He was a short, sprightly man with a slight hunch to his back. His grey hair was neatly trimmed, and it brought out his kind, brown eyes. His skin was bronzed by the sun, accented all the more by his white collared shirt, pants, and sneakers without so much as a scuff on the toe.

"It's my job to keep this club looking like a palace for all those fine folks that make it their stompin' ground for the summer."

"You must have your hands full," I said with a smile.

"Yes, well, it's good to be busy. I'm a widower, you see, so I work here mostly to pass the time." He noticed me glance at the black anchor tattoo on his arm. "Canadian Navy—retired nearly twenty years already."

I smiled politely and started to say goodbye when he interrupted me.

"Pardon me, miss, but I didn't even introduce myself. Gesner—pleased to meet you," he said, extending his hand.

"Odette," I answered, shaking his hand.

"Odette? Well, I finally learn the name of the young lady who's been lingering on the beach all these mornings."

"Excuse me?" I said, feeling exposed. "You mean you've seen me before?"

"Sure as rain I have. I take my breaks up on the deck early in the morning when there ain't a soul around. I see everything from up there. Seen you plenty of times over by that big ole rock, just resting your weary bones. You carrying some heavy load?" he asked wisely.

I looked down at my feet and shook my head. His straight talk reminded me so much of the way Grand-papa used to speak to me. I knew there was no point avoiding the question. "I got a lot on my mind with work and my sister Sophie...and then there's Ma..."

He smiled warmly. "You got to give yourself a break and live a little. Don't get swallowed up by all your problems."

His advice echoed the same words Anne kept telling me. I knew they were both right, but for now I was too tired to go into any more details with him.

"So what's it like inside this place. Pretty swanky, I bet?"

"You wanna come in and see?" he said.

"Oh no, I don't want to trouble you."

"No trouble at all, Miss Odette. Like I said, there ain't a soul around at this hour, so I have the run of the place. Come on in," he said, waving his hand toward the back door.

I hesitated at first but then said, "Oh, all right. Let me see what

all this sailing fuss is about.”

As I followed him down the hallway, I heard him say under his breath, “Talks like a fisherman’s daughter, that one.”

We walked down a short hallway, past the washrooms and supply closet, before reaching the doors that led to the main area. When we entered the great room, the sunlight shining in from the wall of windows revealed a sweeping display of nautical decorations. Paintings and framed photographs hung on the walls, model boats and trophies filled display cases, and an old writing desk held aged charts and ocean maps.

In the corner was a bar constructed in dark wood with a glass cabinet stocked full of whisky, liqueur, and wine. A red carpet led from the main entrance all the way up the staircase to the second floor. High above the room hung a chandelier made from a captain’s wheel and cut glass that reflected the sun.

“Come on upstairs. I want to show you something,” he said, and I followed behind him and his jingling key ring.

As I walked up the stairs, I scanned the clipboards lining the wall, announcing classes and boats for sale. At the top, the room opened up to a large sitting area with groupings of lounge chairs positioned around coffee tables made from old trunks. On each table was a crisp morning paper and bottle of sparkling water for the day’s patrons.

We followed the red carpet to another set of French doors at the front of the building facing the water. Gesner ushered me outside to the large deck. I followed him over to the far corner that overlooked the beach.

From this high up, it was an uninterrupted view of the shoreline and all the boats. This must have been where Gesner stood all those mornings when he saw me sitting against the rock on the beach.

“It’s beautiful.”

“I thought you’d like it,” he said, smiling.

“Thanks for showing me your hideaway spot.”

“The way I see it...everybody needs a little place where they

can get away from it all.”

“I completely agree,” I said, then unintentionally gave a big yawn just as Gesner looked over at me.

“Time for you to get home to bed,” he said. “You go on now, but make sure to come back and see me one of these days.”

“I will,” I replied and let him lead the way back inside.

We reached the bottom of the staircase, and Gesner opened the door for me to leave. Just as I was about to walk outside, a young man appeared on the front step. He seemed to have come from the direction of the dock, and when he looked up at me, I was struck by his intense, blue eyes.

“Pardon me,” he said, seemingly relieved to see us. “Do either of you have a Phillips screwdriver?”

I turned to Gesner and searched his face for what to do. I wasn’t supposed to be in this member-only club, and I didn’t want to get him in trouble for letting me inside.

Gesner winked at me, then calmly replied, “Might be one in the shed. Let me go see.”

He walked past me out the door, and I followed behind him, preparing to make my getaway.

“Excellent, thank you,” said the man now behind us.

Gesner turned toward the shed, and I veered toward the road, turning back only to be polite and nod goodbye.

The stranger caught my eye and called out, “Hello there?”

I considered pretending that I didn’t hear him and continuing across the parking lot. It wasn’t like he would chase me down or anything. But then I realized how childish that would be, so I stopped and tried to think of an excuse as to why I was in the club: I had to use the bathroom. I was Gesner’s long-lost niece. I needed a drink of water.

“Are you new here?” he asked.

“Um—no. Just visiting,” I squeaked, not sure what I had just said.

He looked perplexed as he tried to make sense of the contradictory answer I’d offered him.

He quizzed me again. "So if you're not new here, you must be from here. But if you're from here, then how can you be visiting?"

I tried to recover. "What I *meant* to say was that—um—I am *from* here, but I haven't actually *been* to this club before since my father docks his boat at the other marina in Shediak—the Shediak Marina club—down the road."

I was useless. I should just run away now across the parking lot and disappear.

"Wonderful, a fellow sailor!" he said with enthusiasm and smiled so genuinely that it caught me off guard.

He extended his hand for me to shake, and I noticed an oversized Cartier watch on his wrist and a gold university ring on his finger. He wore a green and white striped polo shirt with the collar up, shirt tucked into long white shorts with a white belt and silver clasp, and deck shoes. He was a couple of years older than me and looked just as confident as the men who posed in the fashion magazines I read at work.

"I'm Odette."

"Henri—pleasure to meet you. My family and I just arrived, and I haven't had the chance to meet too many people here at the club."

He held my hand tightly as I stared into his captivating, blue eyes, set against his dark brown hair. He was tall and smelled of spice and wasn't like anyone I'd ever met before. I tried to look away, but I couldn't. The very sight of him numbed the part of my brain responsible for rational thinking. Otherwise, I would have been able to tell myself that people like me don't mix with boys like him.

Gesner finally reappeared. "Here's your screwdriver, son."

Henri and I released our awkward handshake, and I stepped back.

I was suddenly very aware of the green apron string hanging out of my purse and my concealed sparkly cat socks. I felt like if I stayed too long, this beautiful stranger would see right through me, and I didn't like the way it made me feel.

“Nice to meet you, Henri. I hope you have a pleasant stay in Pointe-du-Chêne,” I stammered as I clasped my purse tightly under my arm and let my rubbery legs carry me across the parking lot.

“Goodbye,” he called out to me, but I didn’t dare look back.

When I reached the trailer a few minutes later, I went straight to my room and fell backward on the bed—safe at last from embarrassing myself any further. The yacht club had been in my peripheral vision my whole life, but today was the first time I’d spent any time on the grounds or even gone inside. And it was obvious from the way I lied to Henri about my dad that I didn’t belong in that place, except for maybe those few minutes up on the deck with Gesner.

I held my hand to my face, the same hand that shook Henri’s hand, and I could still smell him.

Mid-afternoon, I was stretched out on the couch like a tabby cat. Even though it was Monday, it was the start of my two-day weekend, and I was enjoying every minute of it. I had the place all to myself. Ma was out with her boyfriend, and Sophie was down at the beach with her friends, trying out a new surfboard.

I read the morning paper, drank several cups of silty coffee, and mindlessly flipped through the television channels. After a while, my dormant muscles began to twitch, and I knew I needed to move. So I scanned the room with a critical eye and decided the place needed a once-over.

Starting in the living room, I wiped the shelves and their ceramic ornaments with a dust rag, and pirouetted to the rack of Royal Wedding plates, giving them all a new lustre with a swipe of my hand. Then I dragged the vacuum cleaner out of the closet and passed it lightly over the carpet, trying not to let the woolly fibres catch in the rollers. I finished by folding Grand-maman's quilt over the arm of the recliner to hide the frayed fabric, and piling several weeks' worth of newspapers by the door.

In the kitchen, I filled the sink with soapy water and cleaned the leaning stack of dishes, then wiped down the dirty countertop, emptied the ashtray, and arranged the mail on the table. I swept up the crumbs and dusty corners of the floor, wiping the grimy spots with the dust rag and some Windex.

The kitchen was clean, but it still needed a finishing touch.

So I went outside to the back of the trailer and waded through a thicket of weeds until I found what I was looking for. A patch of wild lavender had worked its way over from the neighbour's yard, and I cut enough stalks to make a decent-sized bouquet. On my way back inside, I swiped an empty mayonnaise jar from the trash and rinsed it out in the sink to use as a vase. Then I arranged the flowers in the middle of the table and stood back and smiled. Having a tidy kitchen, in some way, translated to a more organized, normal life, and it felt good.

Now that my chores were done, it was time to pay the bills. I headed down the hall to Sophie's bedroom—the only room uniquely positioned to pick up the neighbour's Wi-Fi signal.

I logged on to my bank account and set aside a portion of my paycheque for groceries and spending money. I made sure to ration enough money to give to Ma for rent and for Sophie's spending allowance. That left seventy-five dollars.

I clicked on the option to move the money into my savings account. When the page opened, it showed a balance of just over two thousand five hundred dollars. I'd been watching this number grow for years now, ever since I started working fulltime at the store after high school. I didn't know what I was saving for, but I felt reassured just knowing it was there. No one knew about the savings account—it was my secret.

I closed the laptop and went to my room to get dressed. It was time to go out and enjoy the beautiful daylight.

Outside, the sun burned brightly in the sky, and I realized I missed it terribly. I searched my purse for my sunglasses and a tube of sunblock to dab on my nose and exposed shoulders.

My first stop was Marguerite's *boulangerie* to pick up a half-dozen white buns for supper. I also bought a single croissant, which I devoured for lunch as I walked down the road. Then I went to the liquor store to pick up another bottle of gin for Ma and something for me and Anne to drink before going out tonight. I ran a few more errands, then finished by stopping at the bank to withdraw some spending cash.

Finally done all my chores, I walked slowly through the village, just to have an excuse to be outside. The air was rich with the smell of newly cut grass. Across the road, the Boudreau family sat under the shade of a wide umbrella, laughing and drinking beer while the charcoals in the barbeque turned grey. A baby screamed with delight as her mother lowered her into a kiddie pool. Carloads of tourists in bright bathing suits barrelled by on their way to the beach, while old Madame Landry in her polyester sundress swept the endless road dust from her front porch.

It made me feel alive to be outside amongst the summer activity. Even though my internal sleep clock was all messed up, I'd still do anything to be out in the sun on my day off.

I arrived back at the trailer with my canvas shopping bag weighing heavy on my shoulder. The rooms still smelled stale even though I'd cleaned the place, so I opened the kitchen window to let in the late afternoon breeze while I unpacked the groceries. The salty air made me contemplate going down to the beach for a swim, and I went to my room to change into my bathing suit. But the task proved to be too tiresome as my body fought the change in circadian rhythm. I lay down on the bed and closed my eyes for only a moment, then dozed off completely.

Later that evening, as I was towel-drying my hair in my bedroom, I heard snippets of a conversation between Anne and Ma coming from down the hall. A few minutes later, Anne poked her head around the corner of my room with a big smile on her face.

"Odette, where have you been all my life?" she said dramatically, running over and wrapping both arms around me until we both fell backward on the bed. Then we began gabbing incessantly to catch up on each other's lives—a habit of ours since we were kids.

"What's going on with Roger?" I asked.

"You're not going to believe this," she said, shaking her head. "Roger says there's no chance for a promotion at the fish plant,

and he doesn't want to be stuck working in the same job forever. So he called his cousin in Alberta, who said there's good-paying work on the oil rigs. So now he wants to move out West to find work."

"What are you going to do?"

Anne sighed. "He asked me to go with him."

Her words hit me like a mutiny. I stared blankly at her, struck by the possibility that my best friend might leave me.

She saw the panic in my eyes and quickly recovered. "I haven't decided to go yet. I love him, but I don't know if it's enough to make me leave my life behind."

She swallowed hard, and I could see her eyes watering.

As her best friend, I knew she was waiting for me to offer advice and to be her voice of reason. But I wasn't ready to give her what she needed to hear—to say that she ought to be with the man she loved if that's what made her happy. I couldn't say it because I didn't want to be left behind.

And then, like in every desperate situation, one must consider whether to laugh or cry. I studied Anne's face as her lips broke a smile.

"Oh, *fuck 'em*," she said sarcastically.

I knew she didn't really mean it, but I appreciated how she'd said it just to make me feel better.

"And..." she continued, "I propose this mantra be our theme for this evening. If anyone gets in my way tonight, they're gonna fuckin' hear it from me. Agreed?"

I nodded, and the phrase was solidified as the evening's code word.

"Now, let's get this party started. What do you have to drink around here?" she said, jumping up from the bed.

"Vodka and OJ," I said, pointing to the bottles on my desk.

"Perfect," she said before disappearing down the hall and returning with two glasses full of ice. She mixed us each a drink, and we clinked our glasses together in a toast before the first sip.

"I've got some news, too," I said, sitting back down on the bed.

"Dish," she said, leaning against the desk and waiting eagerly for me to continue.

"I met a guy at the yacht club this morning. We were—"

"Wait a minute," Anne interrupted, with a dramatic posturing of her hand. "What were *you* doing at the yacht club?"

"*Écoute moi, là*, I didn't go on purpose. I just ended up there on my way home from the beach. There's this nice, old janitor who works at the club. We started talking, and he asked me inside—"

"Hold on—did you make out with an old dude?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"No! Let me finish," I said, rolling my eyes. "Gesner—the old man—let me into the club to look around, then as I was leaving, I ran into this guy—a yachtie, I guess—except he didn't look like any crew I've ever seen before."

"Who is he? Did you talk to him?" Anne asked excitedly.

"I only know his name is Henri, he arrived here a few days ago, and he's kind of—I don't know—intense," I said, pulling my pillow close to my chest.

"He's probably some rich, American boy who sailed in on daddy's boat to summer at his cottage up on The Bluff."

"Maybe."

"You should get to know this guy."

"Yah, right. We don't hang with yachties, remember—we make fun of them."

"That's only because we haven't met any that sound half as cute as Henri. We should go spy on him tomorrow," she said playfully. "We could sit on the beach with binoculars, across from the club, and totally stalk him!"

"Nah, I don't think I could recover if I ever saw him again. I'm telling you I had a physical reaction to being so close to him. Like when you eat something you're allergic to and your ears heat up."

Anne sipped at her drink, staring at me. "You know what you need—a real, live boyfriend. That way you won't fall on your knees every time a boy tries to talk to you. How long's it been?"

"Two years," I said with a pout. "But it's not like I haven't been

looking.”

“I think you’re more interested in curling up in bed with a good book rather than a good man,” she said, gesturing toward the stack of novels on the floor beside the bed.

I rolled my eyes again.

“Drink,” she said, then took our empty glasses and mixed a second round.

It was time to get ready for our night out. After trying on almost all the clothes in my closet, as well as the mountain of accessories Anne had brought over in her backpack, we finally settled on our outfits for the evening.

Anne wore a curvy, pink minidress with gold jewellery and black heels, her golden curls falling around her shoulders, which always made the boys go crazy for her whenever we were out together.

I, on the other hand, was unsuccessful in my bid to *not* dress-up, and eventually the vodka made me bold enough to piece something together. I succumbed to a black tube top with an ill-fitting strapless bra that I prayed would stay in place all night, along with skinny jeans and red heels. As a final touch, Anne made me wear black feather earrings, which I thought made me look like a crow, but she said it was flirty so I left them on.

As we applied our make-up in front of the mirror, Anne told me about her day at school and how the teacher had invited in a veterinarian from Moncton as a guest speaker. Anne had had a chance to talk to him during the break, and they really hit it off. He told her he could hire her as a part-time technician while she finished school.

I remarked that Moncton, being fifteen minutes away, was too far of a drive, but if she really had to go, then we would find a way to make it work. It was a passive-aggressive comment on my part about her potential move out West. Anne just slapped me on the arm and told me to shut up.

“Hey, what were you ranting on about yesterday on the phone? Something about a guy in a dory?”

My doryman. I hadn't even thought about him since I met Henri.

"Oh, right," I said, not really sure how to describe him since he was still such a mystery.

"There's this doryman...he arrived in town earlier this week, or at least that's when I noticed his boat at the yacht club—"

"*Sérieusement*...again with the yacht club? You're such a snob."

"No," I said, defending the doryman. "He's different. I mean, yes, he does have a boat, but he's *not* a yachtie. He rows his dory to the beach in the morning with his cat."

"*Quoi?*"

"He goes diving—for what I don't know—then gets in the dory again and rows back to his boat."

"Does he swim naked?" Anne asked.

I looked at her in amazement. "How the *hell* did you know that?"

"It's a gift." She smirked. "Is he hot?"

"I haven't really seen his face yet."

"I wasn't talking about his face."

I sighed.

"Oh, loosen up, Odette," she said, annoyed with me. "Tell me, would you do him?"

As usual, Anne was pushing my buttons. I stared at her, thinking of what to say, then grabbed a pillow off the bed and threw it at her.

"Hey, watch the drink!" she yelled.

It was 11:30 p.m. before we finally left the trailer. We were several drinks into the night and walked with the confidence of runway models down the boardwalk, arm in arm, toward the bar at the end of the wharf.

A carload of boys passed us and someone whistled. Anne screamed back *whooooa*, and the car screeched to a stop, then kept

going. We laughed giddily, while trying to keep our heels from wedging in between the wooden slats of the boardwalk.

We finally arrived at the bar with the loudspeakers pulsing out a dance song to lure us inside. The main level was standing room only, and the girls all held pink margaritas while the boys drank beer. We decided to go upstairs, where there was more room and a dance floor. I did my best to walk up the steps in my heels, holding on to the wooden banister for balance. Anne steadied herself by latching on to the belt loop on the back of my jeans.

"*Odette et Anne...quelle surprise,*" Vincent remarked, as we approached the bar.

Vincent always said that when he saw one of us, the other wasn't too far behind. The three of us had gone to school together since we were kids. He worked on the cruise boats by day and bartended at night.

"*Ferme ta gueule* and pour us some margaritas," Anne ordered.

Vincent lined up two glasses on the bar, then he scooped a cup of ice and frozen strawberries into the blender, and free-poured the rum. "I must say, you ladies are looking *ravissantes, ce soir.*"

"Why, thank you, Vincent. Are you fishing for a tip," Anne said flirtatiously with a wink, to which Vincent just shook his head and smiled.

"It's busy tonight," I said over the loud music.

"A bunch of new yachts just sailed in. You should see them all down at the club," he said.

"Yah, tell me about it," Anne replied, giving me the eye.

We watched the pink liquid swirl inside the blender, and it reminded me of the slushie machine at work. He poured the frothy drinks into the round glasses and pushed them toward us.

"Ladies," he said, topping each drink with a paper umbrella.

"Bottoms up," Anne gestured.

"Cheers," I said, taking a sip, and Vincent joined us with a shot of tequila.

Anne and I eventually made our way to the patio, where it

wasn't so loud and there was more standing room. We leaned against the railing and watched the comings and goings of the people below. A group of Harley drivers cruised by, filling the air with their loud engine vibrato. Boys stood to the side of the building, smoking and staring at the girls texting by the door.

Across the road, the lobster boats were tied up along the wharf. I dared not look over at the sailing club for fear Anne would tease me about it for the rest of the night.

"Come on, we're dancing!" Anne yelled to me over the music.

She pulled me to the dance floor just as a few other girls joined in. Anne played air guitar, and I tried to do the same, but I was laughing too hard to keep up. The DJ pointed a blue spotlight on the disco ball overhead, refracting the light across the room. I spun around at the same speed as the dots on the floor, pretending I was one of a million stars in the night sky.

We laughed and danced until the song changed, at which time I realized I was far too inebriated to continue in such a way. Plus, my tube top wasn't cooperating with all the bouncing, so we left the dance floor and went back outside to catch our breath and sip thirstily from our margaritas.

We leaned against the railing with our backs to the water and watched the crowd inside. Anne noticed a friend from class standing at the bar and waved. There was a couple kissing in the corner, and Anne and I both stuck out our tongues in disapproval. A group of pimply boys with guaranteed fake ID cards sat at a nearby table, eyeing Anne, but we completely ignored them.

Then Anne noticed a group of people coming up the stairs. "Yummy—look what the cat just drug in," she purred.

I followed her gaze over to the stairs. "Oh no—it's him!" I panicked.

"Who's him? The doryman?" She squealed and poked me in the ribs.

"No, it's Henri!"

"Holy shit—Mother have mercy," she said. "That boy is *fine*."

I turned my back to the stairs and shielded the side of my

face with my hand. "What's he doing here?" I said with a spark of heartburn forming.

"I don't know. Let's go ask him."

"No!" I shouted nervously and grabbed her arm. "What's he doing?"

Anne assessed the situation with shifty eyes. "He's walking up to the bar with a very fine ass and ordering a drink. He's with a guy and a girl."

"Is she pretty?" I said, the words slipping out of my mouth before I could stop them.

"Gorgeous. Looks like money, walks like money, fake boobs, and a diamond necklace."

I groaned and looked for the closest exit.

"You know what, it's all good. They have their drinks and are walking away. We can sneak down the stairs if you want."

"Thank God," I said, relieved. "Just tell me when to turn around."

"Okay, wait for it...now!"

I grabbed hold of my tube top with both hands and turned to dash for the stairs, when all of a sudden there stood Henri right in front of me, outlined in a heavenly aura of disco ball light.

"Odette?" he said with a dazzling smile.

I turned to Anne with a glare of betrayal, but she only mouthed the words *deux ans sans boyfriend*.

"Um—Henri, right? Great to see you. Wow—what are you doing here?" I blurted out, trying to be cool while at the same time starting to perspire.

"We heard Margarita Monday was the big night out around here, so we thought we'd give it a try. What about you?" he asked.

"Um—well, this is my best friend, Anne, and we've both been *really* busy lately, you know, doing this and that—and um—we decided to go out tonight for a few drinks and dance," I said pathetically.

"Great, I thought you'd never ask," he said, taking my hand and leading me to the dance floor just as a sultry waltz began to

play, sung by a fragile, female voice.

*Sometimes I'm insecure and I don't feel pretty.
Sometimes I'm dust on the floor, I move to corners
When people pass me.
Here I am, here I am. Can you see?
Here I am, here I am.
Will you be the one to save me?*

*Can you take this fear away and break it
Into pieces for me?
Can you tell me I'm perfect and I'm lovely when my
Head overwhelms me?
Here I am, here I am. Can you see?
Here I am, here I am.
Will you be the one to save me?*

Henri placed his hand on my back and held me close. When I realized I was clinging to him, I released my grip and tried to step back, but he held on. My right leg touched the inside of his left leg, and my knee buckled, but he didn't react in the slightest. We were wrapped together in the song, filtering out the rest of the couples dancing around us.

He was so comfortable and at ease, while I was stiff and unbending—acutely aware that this moment would never repeat itself, and I didn't want it to end. If only I could rest my head in the warmth of his neck and stay there forever. His cologne smelled of new leather. Blue lights circled around us, and I felt like we were swirling in quicksand.

He wrapped his arms tightly around me, and I didn't protest. I felt safe, protected. I could see the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed, could almost feel the fixed measure of his heartbeat.

When the song ended, Henri pushed me back with a hand on

each shoulder and smiled confidently. "How's that for a proper introduction? I had to grab you before you ran off again," he said, leading me off the dance floor.

I smiled back nervously.

"You guys seemed to be having *fun*," Anne said with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes," Henri confirmed. "You have to watch this one—she's a runner."

I shrugged sheepishly as my heart rate slowly came back to normal.

"Let me introduce you to everyone. This is my friend, Sean, from back home."

Sean extended his hand, and I shook it on autopilot.

"And this is Stella—"

"Henri's sister," Anne interrupted.

I shook Stella's hand and forced a casual smile. "Nice to meet you both," I said politely.

I grabbed my drink and downed it a little too quickly, choking on the remaining ice cubes.

"What do you boys do?" Anne asked coyly, digging for information.

"Sean and I are account managers at CLS Funds in Hamilton, Bermuda. Actually, my father owns the company, and now all he does is sit on the board of directors and tell us what to do," Henri said, and they all laughed.

"So what brings you to our little New Brunswick beach?" Anne asked.

"We sailed here on holiday with my parents. We have a summer home on the other side of town."

"The Bluff?" Anne asked.

"Yes, that's right," Henri said.

Anne shot me one of her *I told you so* looks, but Henri didn't seem to notice.

"We've only been here a few days, but Stella's already going through withdrawal. She can't stand to be separated from her

friends and their shopping weekends in New York,” Henri teased, then put his arm around Stella for a brotherly hug.

“And what do you do, Anne?” Sean asked.

“I go to school. I’m in the veterinary program.”

“A vet? Very nice,” Sean said.

Anne opened her mouth to clarify that she was actually studying to be a technician, but I elbowed her in the ribs, and she stopped midbreath.

“And you, Odette?” he asked.

The attention turned to me, and I felt panicked again. I blurted out the first thing that came to mind. “I work at a small shop in town.”

“A designer boutique?” Stella asked, suddenly interested in the conversation as it turned to shopping.

“Sort of,” I lied, feeling my face get hot.

“Maybe you could take Stella shopping one of these days?” Henri asked.

“Sure,” I said hesitantly, and Stella clasped her hands together excitedly.

I was in so deep at this point that no ladder could save me from this pit of lies. My armpits felt wet.

“Have you been out sailing lately?” Henri asked.

I could feel Anne staring me down.

“Nope,” I answered honestly.

“You should come by the club tomorrow. Sean and I are taking father’s boat out for a sail, and we could use another hand. Anne, you should come too,” he offered.

“Oh, look at the time,” I said, just short of hyperventilating. “It’s past midnight, and we really have to be going now to meet Roger back at your place, right, Anne?” I said, giving her my most intense evil eye so she’d back me up.

“Fine,” she said, annoyed at me for cutting the party short. She put her arm through mine, and we turned to leave.

“Tomorrow afternoon—say 3:00 p.m. at the club?” Henri asked.

"Maybe—I'll see—goodnight," I yelled back over the music, and we hurried toward the stairs.

When we reached the road, I glanced back to see Henri on the patio, watching us walk away. I rushed Anne down the boardwalk until she finally tugged on my arm for me to slow down.

"Geez, where's the fire?" she said, catching her breath.

"Sorry. I just needed to get away from there. Whenever I see this guy he turns me into a lying moron," I said.

"I have to admit, girl, you impressed me tonight. I didn't think you had it in you."

"What are you talking about," I asked, yanking up my tube top again.

"At first I wasn't sure where you were going with it all, but now I think you might actually be a brilliant flirt."

"I don't know about that. Maybe it was the earrings."

"*Sérieusement*... I don't think he gave a rat's ass what you said to him tonight. He was *totally* into you."

"*Vraiment?*"

"*Oui*. You two were like sex on the dance floor."

"I told him my dad owns a sailboat."

"For that one you get a pass. What were you supposed to do? Tell him he went to prison for murder?"

"I'm such a liar," I said, disappointed in myself.

Anne paused for a second, then offered up her most profound piece of advice, as only a best friend could do. "Yah, well, *fuck 'im* if he can't take a joke."

We laughed all the way down the boardwalk, and by the time we reached the end of the wharf, we had to wipe the tears from our eyes.

As we turned the corner to go home, I glanced back at the sailing club to the yachts safely harboured for the night. One boat in particular caught my attention—the one anchored farther away from the other boats, with a lantern at the stern, casting a warm glow over its tethered red dory.

"Trying to guess which one is lover boy's?" she asked.

“Yah, sure,” I answered.

Anne and I arrived back at the trailer, shushing each other as we crept down the hallway to my bedroom, while trying not to wake up Ma.

By the time I finish brushing my teeth, Anne had already passed out on top of the blankets. I rolled her over and tucked her in with a quilt, then lifted up the sheets on my side of the bed and crawled in.

I lay awake for some time, thinking about Henri. I rationalized that it was probably best to just walk away and never see him again. On the other hand, he was going to be here all summer, and he'd no doubt be trying to meet new people, maybe even date? Despite all my reasoning, the frugality of a summer fling made me wince, and I rolled over to sleep it off and forget about it. I stared at the map on the wall, illuminated by the moonlight coming in through the window, and pinpointed Bermuda floating out in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

Just then I heard a noise down the hall, and I sat up in bed, listening until I realized it was just Sophie coming home from a late night out. She tiptoed down the hall and went into her room, closing the door quietly behind her. It was 2:07 a.m.

After a monotonous hour of laying awake and listening to Anne snore, I went to the kitchen for a glass of water. Then I laid down on the couch, wrapped myself in Grand-maman's quilt, and fell asleep reading a book.

Part II: August

caste *n.*

1 hereditary social classes whose members
have no social contact with other classes

2 a social order

Kite

Water dripped in the sink, making a sound like a hollow drum. I opened my eyes to see Ma in the kitchen, filling the kettle, and I remembered that I'd fallen asleep on the couch last night. I reached for the remote and turned on the television, clicking through the channels until I found the news.

Today was a day everybody was talking about—*la Fête nationale de l'Acadie*. I turned up the volume to hear the end of a report about citizens painting telephone poles red, white, and blue to match the Acadian flag. The news switched to a live broadcast from the beach, where the annual KiteFest competition would be taking place that afternoon.

I muted the television and propped myself up on one elbow, trying to unravel my legs from the twisted blanket. The remaining alcohol in my system from my night out with Anne, along with the sun shining in on me through the window, left me feeling overheated and, quite possibly, combustible. I started for the kitchen to get some water when I noticed a book, mixed in with a pile of frayed magazines on the shelf below the television, entitled *The Complete Sailing Manual*.

I grabbed the dusty cover and took a seat on the recliner. Memories came flooding back to when Grand-papa and I had found the book together at a yard sale during one of our morning walks together, and he'd given me fifty cents so I could buy it. As I flipped through the stiff pages, I remembered how I used to love looking at all the pictures of the boats, never paying much attention to the words. But now it was these explanations that caught

my attention, descriptions on how to work the sails, tie ropes, and read weather systems. Maybe this would give me just the information I needed to not look like a complete fool in front of Henri. That was, *if* I actually decided to go sailing with him today.

Ma came into the living room and handed me a cup of coffee. I stirred the grinds until they dissolved, staring at the eddy made by my spoon. Ma was in a motherly mood today, I could tell. Every so often she'd wrap all of her parenting duties into one day and be unfailingly nice to me and Sophie. Sometimes she'd even invite Natalie and the kids over, and we'd all sit around the kitchen table and eat supper together like a normal family.

"How was last night?" she asked, taking a seat on the couch.

"Fine," I answered guardedly, taking a sip of coffee. "My head hurts a little, though."

"Figured so," she said, as she picked some lint off her T-shirt.

"Was cutie Vincent working the bar?"

"*Oui*, same old Vincent," I said.

She lit a smoke and took a long drag, then exhaled with pleasure. I didn't like the insinuation, so I turned away. She'd always had a thing for younger men.

"How's work going these days?" she asked.

"Fine, I guess. It's not like much exciting ever happens at the store."

"That's not the point, Odette. You gotta think about right here, right now. It's a good-paying job, and you'd be stupid to mess that up." She paused for a moment, then took a quick drag from her cigarette. "Plus, it's time we start getting some new things around here."

I looked up at her cautiously. She was baiting me for something, I was sure of it. "What are you talking about?"

"To start with, how about a car!" she said enthusiastically, raising her hands in the air like a halleluiaah.

"What?" I said incredulously.

How could Ma propose such a thing, knowing that the reason we didn't already own a car was because she couldn't afford the

last one. When she didn't make the payments on time, the dealer hired a thug from Moncton to come to the trailer. Ma had tried every tactic to get him to leave. First she played nice, then she turned all crazy on him, but none of it worked. All we could do was stand there in the middle of the road, in front of all the neighbours, while he drove away with our car.

"If my *investments* had 'a turned a profit like I'd hoped, I wouldn't be mentioning this at all. But I thought that with your new promotion at work, you probably got some extra cash sittin' around that we could put toward a car. Maybe a sporty little two-door or somethin'?"

I stared at her in disbelief. She wasn't here to be motherly at all. She was just buttering me up to ask for more money. Plus, I hated how she always referred to her bingo cards as her *investments*. Sure, she had a natural talent for the game, but she still had the problem of not knowing when to walk away with her winnings. She'd keep gambling until her luck ran out and the money was all gone.

Ma watched me for a response. She must have interpreted my frown as if I didn't fully understand her proposition, so she further clarified her point. "Not a *new* car, silly, a used one. One we could afford—say a couple thousand dollars?"

My head hurt, and I didn't want to deal with any of this right now. "I'll think about it," I said, just to get her off my back.

"*Super!*" she said, smiling broadly. "I must go put on my face before anyone sees me like this."

She disappeared down the hall to her bedroom, leaving me rolling my eyes at the ceiling.

I started flipping madly through the pages of the sailing book again, but I couldn't concentrate, so I turned up the volume on the television. The local broadcast had turned to international news, and the anchorwoman announced that a suicide bomber had taken the lives of three more Canadian soldiers. The tally of dead servicemen and women was rising, alongside the Americans—a story that kept repeating itself every day in the news to no end.

I didn't know why, but it made me think of Laurent. I wondered what he must have gone through growing up in the Congo.

I turned off the television and went to the kitchen to make two cups of coffee, then walked down the hall to my bedroom to see if Anne was awake yet.

Anne heard me open the door and sat up in bed as I passed her a mug. She had extreme bedhead and racoon-like eyes, and I was utterly amazed how one night's sleep in last night's make-up could produce such results. She asked why I was laughing, and I told her to look in the mirror.

"The worst thing is falling asleep with an underwire on," she said, tugging at the bra under her oversized T-shirt.

"How'd you sleep?"

"Like a drunken baby," she answered. "*Toi?*"

"Not great."

"Why's that?" she asked, taking a sip of coffee.

"My heartburn's getting worse."

Anne closed her eyes as she recalled the drama from the night before with Henri. "Well, I hate to be the one to say it to you, kid, but you kinda cause your own acid reflux."

I made a face at her, but I knew she was right. No one forced me to lie to Henri and create this alter ego. I did it all on my own out of a sheer unwillingness to share the real details about my ordinary life with someone as sophisticated as him.

"Listen," she said when she saw my pained expression. "You're the one in control here. If he thinks you're someone else, then who cares—just go with it. The important thing is that he likes you, and at this point you just need to loosen up and have some fun this summer."

"*Oui, t'as raison.*"

"Does this mean you'll go sailing with him?"

"I don't know."

Anne sighed and said, "Oh, my aching head," and fell back against the pillow.

Once the coffee and a couple of Ma's pain pills brought us to near normalcy, Anne crawled out of bed and called Roger to come pick her up. She gathered her things into her backpack, and we went outside in our pyjamas and sunglasses to wait for him on the porch. Roger arrived a few minutes later, and I waved goodbye as they drove away.

I lingered awhile longer on the porch, noticing how the sun reflected off the metal siding of the trailer. I'd lived in this shiny lego block with Ma and my sisters my whole life, always assuming I'd stay for at least a few more years while I settled into my promotion and Sophie finished school. The arrangement had seemed perfectly fine, except lately I couldn't deny this restlessness that gnawed at me whenever I thought about the future.

My stomach growled, commanding my attention, so I went back inside. I poured Cheerios and water into a bowl and ate my breakfast at the kitchen table, surrounded by piles of bills.

I picked up yesterday's newspaper and flipped through the pages while I waited for Sophie to get up. I wondered if she remembered that today was KiteFest—the guaranteed one day each year that we'd spend together. It was a tradition of ours since we were kids, and I was happy to keep it alive just to spend time with her. It was our thing—a piece of childhood we held on to.

Eventually, I heard a bedroom door open, and Sophie emerged from her lair.

"Why aren't you ready yet!" she said accusingly.

"Ready for what? What's so special about today?" I teased her.

She glared at me and crossed her arms, while I tried to keep a straight face.

"All right, all right. Give me ten minutes," I said. "And eat something before we leave."

The day was promising to be hot and humid, and I couldn't wait to get outside. As we prepared to leave, I stuffed a backpack with towels, a frozen water bottle, and snacks. Then Sophie and I put

on our sunhats and sunglasses, admired ourselves in the mirror, and high-fived as we walked out the door.

“Wait!” I said. “I almost forgot the kite.”

I ran back into the trailer and snatched the kite from under my bed, where I’d stored it for safekeeping. It had taken a while to find just the right kite, but when I saw it at the back of the hardware store I just knew I had to have it. Most people chose the predictable Acadian flag with red, white, and blue stripes and a tail of yellow stars, or a dragon with a fiery tongue and a green tail that cut through the wind. But not me—my kite was different. I hadn’t shown it to anyone yet, not even Sophie, and keeping it a surprise was half the fun.

Sophie and I joked and played tag with each other as we followed the crowd of people making their way to the beach. When we finally arrived, we walked up the arch of the footbridge over the dunes to a skyline painted full of soaring, diving, and twirling kites.

Instantly, I felt six years old again.

There were children everywhere, laughing and running in the sand, while the parents helped pull the lines tight so they wouldn’t tangle with the other kites. A low-flying kite skimmed my hat, then nose-dived into a row of towels that had been so carefully laid out. Directly above us, an aggressive dragon kite flapped against the wind as its tail whipped around like a gas-fuelled fireball.

Sophie and I quickly found a clearing on the beach and fell to our knees, eager to rip open the packaging on our kite. The nylon fabric smelled of chemicals, and the label read *Made in Vietnam*. Sophie was as giddy as the children running past us, and I was happy that she still thought it was cool to hang out with her big sister. Her hair fell in her eyes, but she remained focused on unfolding the kite.

Finally, it was revealed to us: a black and white silkscreen of Elvis’s head, circa 1976, with a velvet swatch of hair and a white collar. It was hideously perfect, and we laughed at the face staring

back at us. I had a good feeling about this kite.

We were ready to launch, and I cradled Elvis in my arms, giving him a kiss on the cheek while Sophie stood impatiently with the spool of line. We walked together to the water's edge, where the sand was hardpacked and easier to run on. A group of people walked by, and we waited for the course to clear before taking our turn. The cool ocean water rushed over our feet as we stood in preparation for liftoff. Our flip-flops suctioned in the wet sand, threatening to break loose at the toes.

"Ready...one, two, three, go!"

I held Elvis high above my head as Sophie sprinted down the runway with the spool held tightly in both hands. The kite snapped out of my grip and immediately took flight. Sophie ran faster until the kite soared high in the air. I caught up to her to help hold the line, but she was doing fine all by herself. The kite moved neurotically and eclipsed the sun as it sliced through the sky, the tail pieces pattering in the wind like the sound of a playing card in a child's bicycle spoke.

The kite was everything I had hoped it would be. It was big and bold, flying high and free above the earth.

Sophie screamed as she fumbled the spool, almost releasing the kite on a course back to Vietnam. But she quickly regained control and held on tight. I told her to let out more line and to hold it steady.

Finally, the kite hit a smooth pocket of air and glided effortlessly high in the sky. The line steadied, and we could relax a little. We worked our way up the beach, away from the water, so we could lie on our backs and watch the chaotic, colourful sky.

"I think we have the best kite here," Sophie said proudly, looking out at the other kites.

"Glad you have a sense of humour," I said, since our kite looked nothing at all like the rest.

It was turning out to be a perfect day at the beach. I grabbed the bottle of water out of my pack and passed it to Sophie. She gave me the line to hold while she took a drink, and I gladly took

my turn with the kite. I lay back in the sand, watching Elvis gyrate across the sky in the wind.

Out on the water, a speedboat ripped through the waves, leaving ribbons of wake behind it for the water skiers. A boy on a sandbar shouted that he'd found a hermit crab, and a small group gathered around him to inspect it.

"Tell me, what's new? What have you been up to lately?" I asked Sophie.

She stared at our kite high above. "Not much. Just hanging out and stuff."

Failing at my first attempt at small talk, I realized I was going to have to be more specific if I wanted any details from her. "Do you have a boyfriend? What about that guy you brought to the store the other night?"

"You mean Christian? He's *not* my boyfriend. We just hang out and surf together."

"Hmm," I said, not ready to let it go. "So who are you *hanging out* with now?"

"There is this new guy I just met—André."

"Where'd you meet him—at school?"

"*Non*," she said, like I ought to know better. "He graduated last year."

That would make him nineteen years old. She was only fifteen. I instantly hated the idea of her being with him, but I was careful not to sound too judgmental and make her like him even more.

"And where does André work?" I asked calmly.

"He's *un mécanicien* at some auto shop in Shediac...not sure which one."

I thought carefully about what to say next. "My best advice to you, whether you want it or not, is to take your time getting to know him. Maybe just go on a couple of dates first to see if you really like him before committing to anything. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Oh, look, there's Sandra. Be back in a sec," she said, jumping

to her feet and running down the beach toward her friend.

"Lovely," I said to no one in particular and began reeling in the line.

Sophie signaled that she was going for a walk down the beach with her friends. I scanned the group for André but saw no one fitting the description of a loser who couldn't find a girl his own age to date, so I waved for her to go on.

Over by the outdoor pavilion, a man announced into a microphone that the judges had picked the winning kites. The awards ceremony was about to begin. I didn't feel like sticking around for it, so I finished reeling in the kite. Elvis landed with a thud in a clearing in front of me, and I quickly attached him to my backpack. When I slung the pack over my shoulders, the kite jutted out like butterfly wings on either side of me.

As I turned to leave, I heard the announcer say, "Starting with honourable mention for most humorous kite, the prize goes to *Flying Elvis!*"

The crowd applauded, and someone patted me on the shoulder to congratulate me. Of all the years I'd been going to KiteFest, this was the first time I'd ever won anything, and I smiled despite myself. I walked up to the stage in a daze to collect my prize. The announcer shook my hand and passed me a gift certificate for Pizza Delight. I turned my back to the crowd and proudly displayed Elvis strapped to my backpack, and everyone cheered again.

By the time I left the stage, I was feeling quite elated about how the day had turned around, despite my failed talk with Sophie. I started to walk home, but with the distraction of the day over, I was faced with the nagging question I'd been trying to ignore all afternoon. I hadn't decided whether or not to go sailing with Henri.

My plan all along had been to delay making a decision until it was too late, and Henri would leave without me, and that would be that. On the other hand, if Henri waited for me, or if he was running late for some reason, it was possible that he might still be at the club. If I hurried, I might be able to catch him. But my legs

were leaden with doubt, and a big part of me just wanted to go home and bury my head under my pillow.

However, despite my insecurity over seeing Henri again, I didn't turn to go home when I arrived at the crossroad. My curiosity overtook my logic, and I continued on toward the sailing club. I had to see if Henri was still there. At least this way I could say that I had shown up, even if he had left without me.

I hurried across the parking lot and stood on the grass beside the dock with the *Members Only* sign. Just as I had suspected, Henri had tired of waiting for me and was long gone. I scanned the horizon and saw a yacht in the distance, but it was too far out for me to wave and get their attention. Half disappointed, yet half relieved, I turned to go home.

As I walked past the club, I noticed Stella sitting on the patio with an older couple, who I assumed were her parents. I wanted to say hi to Stella, to make it known that I'd come here to meet her brother to go sailing, but decided against it. She was sipping a glass of champagne and engrossed in a conversation that I didn't care to interrupt.

Stella's mother was petite with dark brown hair and a glowing face that didn't entirely look her age. She wore a polka-dot sundress with a red belt, a round sun hat, and square sunglasses. Her nails were painted a flawless cherry red. Stella's father sat beside them, sipping what looked like scotch on ice. He had salt-and-pepper hair and a thick moustache. He seemed to be in fairly good shape, like perhaps he played tennis or worked out on a stationary bike. I imagined him to be an authoritative man since he owned his own investment company.

As if she could sense me staring at her, Stella's mother turned and looked straight at me. I immediately spun around and casually walked away like nothing had happened.

"Oh my," I heard her say from behind me, the ice in her drink clinking as she placed it on the table. "What is that dreadful apparatus on that poor girl's back?" she gaffed. "Is that...Elvis?"

Hearing the tone of her voice made me laugh. Part of me

enjoyed how appalling it must seem to her that someone would walk around town for no apparent reason with an Elvis face on their back.

"Now, dear, let's be civil. She's just a local," Stella's father said in a rehearsed sort of way, like he was used to appeasing his wife.

"Yes, I suppose so."

Stella didn't utter a word.

I had just about crossed the parking lot when I heard, "*Bonjour, Miss Odette,*" and turned to see Gesner walking toward me.

"I wondered if you'd ever come back to say hello to an old man like me," he said playfully.

"Of course," I said, smiling at him. "How could I resist your charm?"

"You got a bit of sun today," he said, noticing my freckles.

"I was at KiteFest with my little sister. We even won a prize," I said, turning around so he could see the face attached to my backpack.

"That's one hell of a kite," he said, shaking his head.

I noticed Gesner wasn't wearing his typical white uniform, but rather a pair of blue jeans and a white T-shirt with the Canadian Navy crest.

"My shift's over. I'm just out for a stroll, enjoying the day. Would you like to join me for an ice cream?" he asked.

"Love to," I said, realizing just how much I enjoyed his company.

We walked together to the ice cream stand at the end of the wharf. I ordered a chocolate cone, and he chose vanilla, refusing to let me pay, which I think made him feel good to treat me.

We sat at a picnic table and watched the men mackerel fishing on the backside of the wharf along the storage buildings. Skinny men and pot-bellied men stood together, each with a foot raised on the edge of the wharf as they sought out a thick school of fish.

Their lines were baited with feathers and weighted with spoon

jigs. Each man had his own fishing technique—one twitched the line repetitively while another took his time, hoping for a double or triple catch on the hooks. At their feet were white pails tied with twine to lower over the side of the wharf and fill with sea water for cleaning the fish and then dumping the heads and guts back into the water. The fresh blood on the cement turned black under the hot sun. The clean, slippery bodies were already placed in plastic grocery bags to bring home for supper or to give to a needy neighbour.

Behind us, a group of teenagers hollered as they braved cannonballs off the end of the wharf. Their friends stood by at the railing, cheering them on as they splashed into the deep water. A dog barked anxiously as it peered over the edge at the boys swimming below.

We turned our attention back to the ice cream that quenched our thirst on such a hot day, laughing as we tried to keep it from dripping down the cone.

Pelican

*B*ing bong.

“*Salut, Aline,*” I said to my favourite co-worker standing by the counter arranging packages of red Twizzlers.

“*Bonsoir, la petite,*” she replied. “Did you have a nice break?”

“Yes...went to the beach...danced with a boy,” I said nonchalantly.

“What?” she said, leaving the counter and following behind me as I walked to the staff room.

“Did you meet a suitable man? Where is he from? Does he show interest in marriage?” she asked excitedly.

“Wait a minute—hold your horses,” I said, putting up my hand. “He’s American—here on summer vacation with his family. But trust me, he’s *not* marriage material.”

“Why, what is wrong with him?”

“He’s rich.”

Aline frowned, trying to work out the problem in her mind. “But does he show interest in you?”

“Hmm—yes. He does show interest.”

“Well, then, life is full of possibility,” she said optimistically.

“It was *just* a dance.”

As we walked back out to the front, I cast a critical eye around the store. “Anything happen while I was gone?”

“Let me think. We received a Heinz shipment that needs to be stocked. I started work on it yesterday but did not finish. I was not

supposed to be working, but Ted called in sick. That reminds me, I will take all extra shifts because I am saving to buy a new couch.”

“Sure, okay,” I said. “What type of couch are you looking for?”

“I cannot afford the same furniture I once had in Lebanon. In those days, it was only the best for us. Now we just want something affordable—maybe red for a bold colour. Whatever we get will be better than what we have now from Salvation Army. I have to throw a sheet over it because fabric is so worn. It is a disgraceful couch,” she said.

I frowned, and Aline nodded in agreement.

“We need to purchase many new things before Reem’s parents visit next month.”

“A visit from the in-laws? That’s a pretty big deal.”

“Yes, especially for them because they have never been to Canada. We have told them so many great things about our new lives here. Now we must show them how good it is.”

“What do you have planned?”

“First, I must present a good home. I think a new couch will make a big difference in living room. The children’s rooms are fine with new beds and a desk for homework. We will put the children together in one room, and Reem’s parents will sleep in other one. I will also bake just before they arrive so we will have plenty to eat. Oh, and we must buy gifts—many gifts for them to bring back to Beirut for aunts, uncles, and cousins.”

“Are you sure about all that? It sounds like a lot of work.”

“No, no, no. We live in Canada now, so we must share our fortune with our families back home.”

Of everything I knew about Aline, I could hardly agree that she had a sufficient *fortune* to spread around. Things had not been easy for her these past few years.

“Is it important to you that your family thinks you’re doing well?”

“It is essential—they expect it! We tell them we are doing very well here so they will not worry.”

“But if it’s too hard to keep up the appearance of the same life-

style you used to have, couldn't you just tell your family that you have a more *modest* life here in Canada? That way they wouldn't expect gifts and money."

I chose my words carefully, not wanting to offend her. If Aline didn't have to put on such a show for her in-laws, then she'd have more money to spend on herself, which quite frankly, she could use. I saw the pulls in her knit sweater, and the broken zipper in her pants held up by a safety pin.

"No. We are very lucky to be in North America. Life is better for us and our children here," she said with conviction.

"Also," she added, "if I work extra shifts, I can make money to buy a bed frame."

I looked away. I had to process how it was possible that this kind-hearted, educated woman slept on a mattress on the floor. It made me realize how all of her actions were motivated by her children. She was only happy knowing that her family was safe, at whatever the cost. It gave her peace that money couldn't buy.

Aline hummed quietly to herself as she dusted around the front counter. It left me wondering how she was able to hold it all together with so many disappointments in her life. I determined she had either a very strong character or had simply lowered her standards. Maybe it was a bit of both.

I thought life was supposed to get easier as I grew older, but now I wasn't so sure. It certainly hadn't happened for Aline, or even Ma, for that matter. Life had blindsided them both. If it were me, I'd be terrified of starting all over again. But then again, the only thing worse would be standing still.

It had been a long, dull night at the store, and I needed to disengage my mind. I headed toward the beach, barely lit from the dirty cotton sky.

As I entered the clearing, where the tall dune grass hugged the back of the beach, I knew immediately I wasn't alone. I heard murmuring up ahead and traced the sound to a small group of

people gathered near the water. I hesitated, not wanting to show myself in case I didn't want to be part of what was happening, but once I saw them, I could tell they were harmless with their Tilley hats and binoculars.

A lanky man with an equipment bag bearing the ATV Channel News logo struggled to set up a tripod in the sand.

I wasn't used to strangers on my beach so early in the morning, but my curiosity got the best of me, and I walked over to find out what was going on.

"Excuse me," I said politely but was immediately shushed by an older lady, who put her finger up to her puckered lips.

"Sorry," I said in a hushed voice. "What's going on?"

"My dear, it's an amazing occurrence. Look out to that sandbar, and tell me what you see?"

She handed me her binoculars, and I placed the heavy goggles up to my eyes, pinpointing a silhouette out in the water. I focused in on it until it became an outline of a large bird.

"Is that a pelican?" I asked.

"Very good, dear," she said, praising me like a schoolteacher. "*Pelecanus erythrorhynchos* to be precise, or otherwise known as the American White Pelican. Isn't she beautiful? Did you know that these creatures have been around for over forty million years?"

"That's amazing," I said in awe. "I've never seen one before."

"That's because they're not supposed to be here. These birds are only found in western North America, not here on the East Coast," she explained in a scholarly voice. "This one must have been set off course by unusual weather. It's really quite extraordinary to see her, don't you think?"

"Yes, I do," I agreed.

I stared at the bird through the binoculars—a magnificent female perched about twenty-five meters out in the shallow water. She sat perfectly still, her body curled in a tight S-shape with her long, fleshy bill hovering just above the water. Her white plumage was backlit from the morning light, creating an ethereal glow

around her.

"Do you see her enormous pouched bill? It's empty now, of course, but it stretches to allow her to trap fish inside. And if you stay long enough to see her take flight, you'll witness her incredible wingspan, which can measure up to three meters."

I peered through the binoculars again to examine her bill when I noticed a faint glint. "Huh?" I said.

"What is it, dear?" the schoolteacher asked.

"I think I see a piece of metal. Is she tagged like they do with endangered species?"

"No, I'm afraid that's not it. She has a fishing hook caught in her bill. It's more common than you'd think. Pelicans congregate along wharfs, where they're apt to find an easy meal. People fish from the wharf or nearby boats and the hooks get stuck in the fish. The fish get away, and the poor pelicans go after the fish, and you can figure out the rest of the story."

"What's going to happen to her?"

"It's hard to say, really, without closer examination. Some birds can live a long time with a hook pierced in their flesh. Others will die of infection. We can only hope for the best in this case."

An older man with a pointy moustache noticed me talking to the schoolteacher and walked over to where I stood. "You're very lucky to be here to witness this marvellous occurrence," he said quietly.

I couldn't quite place his accent, so I asked, "You don't seem to be from around here. How did you and the others know the pelican was here?"

A few people chuckled, and I felt like I was missing the obvious.

"We're birders," piped an older lady with a yellow sweater that accentuated the hump on her upper back. "I received an email alert yesterday saying there was a confirmed pelican sighting. So my daughter drove me here from Prince Edward Island."

"I drove in from Lawrencetown Beach just a few hours away," another voice said.

"I took the ferry from Grand Manan Island—a bird watcher's paradise, my dear," another said.

"I flew in from Louisiana," another man said, and we all turned to look at him.

"Well, actually," he said, "I didn't come here for the sighting. I'm visiting my brother in Shediac, and he happened to overhear someone talking about the pelican and told me about it. I've always been interested in pelicans, though. Did you know there's one on our state flag?"

"No, I didn't know that," I answered, feeling like this chance meeting was becoming quite surreal.

"I'm from the area, so I didn't have far to travel," the schoolteacher said. "I've been a birder for almost twenty years now, ever since I retired. Sightings like this one don't come around very often, but when they do, they make it all worth it."

She paused to study the pelican again and wrinkled her forehead.

"Poor old girl. One minute she's flying with her flock and the next she's tired and all alone, forced to make a pit stop on an unknown beach to refuel and check her bearings. Reminds me of a story my father told me about the old clipper seaplanes from back in the 1930s that used to stop right here in The Point every week for fuel."

She sighed, then said, "I do hope she'll find her way back home."

"Me too," I said, looking back at the lonely bird.

While the schoolteacher chattered on about the pelican's attributes, I felt in awe of this chance meeting with this fascinating community of birders. I didn't know anything about birdwatching and certainly had never heard of people having the time or money to travel at a moment's notice just to see a bird. If Ma knew I was here right now, she'd be howling at me, saying these old people were all crazy.

From the back of the group, two men discussed the characteristics of the pelican, and it caught my attention.

“The pelican courtship is really something spectacular to see. A group of males will relentlessly chase the female for up to a full day, following her in the water and in flight until she chooses a mate.”

As I focused on their shadowed faces, I was startled to recognize one of the men—the doryman. I moved in closer to the schoolteacher to blend in with the other birders.

The doryman stood just over six feet tall, and his head tilted slightly when he spoke. He wore a black T-shirt that revealed a tattoo along the inside of his forearm. His hair was wet and curled up around his ears, and his shorts dripped a circle in the sand around his feet. He even carried the same mesh bag from the other morning slung over his shoulder. He must have just finished his morning dive.

“Even though the male goes through all the trouble to attract the female, the pair doesn’t actually mate for life. They stay together for the season—a bond tied to the nesting area. Then, when they finally leave the nest, they become independent again. It’s like a summer affair,” the doryman said.

He looked out to the great bird resting by the sandbar as the rising sun began to soften her feathers.

“Tell me, son, what brings you to the beach this morning? Out for an early swim?” the man asked, adjusting his thick glasses to stop them from sliding down his nose.

“Yes sir,” the doryman answered. “I live on my boat, so as you can imagine, it can feel pretty cramped in there after a while. This morning I went diving for oysters.” He swung the mesh bag off his shoulder and offered it to the man. “Here,” he said, “I have plenty.”

The man grinned widely as he took hold of the bag like a child with a pillowcase full of Halloween candy. He examined the contents, then glanced up at the doryman over the rim of his glasses.

“Why, this is very kind of you, young man. My wife’s going to be so pleased.”

“My pleasure,” the doryman replied, then he said goodbye and walked off down the beach.

As he was leaving, I noticed for the first time his little white cat lying inconspicuously in the sand on the outskirts of the crowd. I reached down my hand to coax her to me. She ran over and purred loudly as I stroked under her chin. Then, like a swirling sandstorm, she raced down the beach to the awaiting dory.

War

Chickadee-dee-dee-dee.

I listened to the back and forth call of a pair of chickadees outside my bedroom window. It reminded me of the group of birders I'd met that morning on the beach and how strange the whole experience had been. I still found it remarkable that people would travel all the way here to my small town just to see a pelican on a sandbar.

I rolled over and scrunched my pillow under my head. The alarm clock read 3:40 p.m., still hours before I needed to be awake. I tried closing my eyes again, but they didn't obey. Soon I was watching the chickadees again.

If I didn't sleep, I'd be a mess tonight at the store, but I couldn't help feeling like all I wanted to do was be outside. It was a new day, the sun was shining, and I longed to be a part of it. I spent so much time doing what I was supposed to do that sometimes I forgot what it was like to be young and impulsive, which was probably why people always thought I was the older sister whenever Natalie and I were out together.

I rolled over again, but it was useless pretending to sleep, so I got dressed and headed down the hall to the kitchen. The air smelled of stale cigarette smoke, which meant Ma hadn't come home last night. I drank a glass of water and ate a handful of crackers dipped in the open jar of peanut butter.

Outside, the air was humid and the sun warmed my skin. I nodded to the few people I passed on the road, and breathed in

the cottage smells of citronella and charcoal. Being awake on a work day was like breaking the rules somehow, and it felt good.

With nowhere in particular to go, I found myself walking toward the wharf. I thought I might buy a coffee and sit on a bench to watch the men unload the lobster traps from the boats.

I passed the yacht club and stopped to watch a group of kids on the dock. They were listening attentively to an instructor demonstrating how to raise a sail. Over on the patio, ladies sipped iced drinks and fanned themselves with the newspaper, while the men puffed cigars and pointed to their boats with animated gestures.

Out on the water, a yacht inched away from the dock for a late afternoon sail, leaving behind a wake of Spanish music. The young captain clenched the butt cheek of his bikini-clad companion and gave her a kiss while they waited for the Coast Guard to navigate through the narrow breakwater.

I heard a car pull into the parking lot behind me, and I casually turned to see an open-top jeep with two familiar faces inside—Henri and Stella.

Until then, I'd convinced myself that I was aimlessly enjoying the day with no specific agenda in mind. But now that I saw Henri and felt my pulse rising, I couldn't deny how excited I was to see him. I suddenly realized that I'd hoped for this chance meeting all along, except now that he was right here in front of me, I didn't know what to do about it.

Stella stepped out of the jeep with a Prada purse on her arm. She checked her hair in the side mirror, then walked past me with a sly smile. "Well, hello there, stranger. Long time no see," she said coolly and kept walking toward the club.

Henri was reaching into the backseat, pulling out a few grocery bags, and hadn't yet noticed me.

"Hi," I said timidly as I approached him.

He looked up at me with a neutral expression. "You're late."

I couldn't tell if he was upset with me for standing him up the other day or satisfied that I'd finally shown up. "Guess I lost track of time," I said with a slightly pained expression.

He stared at me with his intense eyes as if he was trying to read me.

"Does the offer still stand to go sailing together?" I asked.

"For you, always," he said with a grin.

He was unfailingly charming, and it made me blush.

"Come with me," he said. "I have to drop these bags off at the boat."

I followed him down the floating dock, wondering which yacht was his. "It's a beautiful day," I said, making obvious small talk.

"It is now."

I smelled his cologne, and it brought me back to the night we danced together at the bar.

"Here we are," he said when we reached the largest yacht at the club.

Henri placed the groceries on the dock, then reached for the boat railing to hoist himself aboard. I handed him the bags one at a time, and he held out his hand to help steady me as I leapt over the gap. His hand lingered in mine for a moment longer than it needed to before he let go.

I looked around and couldn't hide my excitement at being on board such a luxurious yacht.

Henri noticed the expression on my face. "Impressive, I know. Only the best for my father."

"It's quite something."

"I'll give you the tour," he said and led me around the deck.

I was standing on the *Bermuda Bounty*—a fifty-foot, multi-hull, cruising catamaran that Henri's mother had authorized his father to purchase on his sixtieth birthday. He'd only sailed the boat a few times around Bermuda before taking her on a maiden voyage to international waters en route to New Brunswick. It had been an eight-day sail with a five-person crew consisting of Henri and his parents, Stella, and Sean.

Henri pointed out the different apparatuses around the deck—anchor wells, pulpits, winches—while I tried to keep up.

He probably thought I was interested in the mechanics of the boat because of the lie I'd told him when we first met, about how I regularly sailed with my father at another yacht club. While I did understand the basics of smaller boats, this yacht was *way* out of my league. For now, I had no idea what Henri was talking about, and quite frankly, I was more than a little nervous to be alone with him.

"This yacht's amazing. I've never seen anything like it," I said honestly.

Henri looked at me inquisitively, and I felt like I needed to contrive a better explanation.

"My dad does most of the sailing on our boat, so I haven't learned all the ins and outs yet."

"Odette, you'll never learn all there is to know about sailing. It gets under your skin and in your blood. You could spend a lifetime studying it," he said, and I believed him.

I wished Grand-papa could see me now, standing on such an impressive boat. He would think I'd come a long way from my little yellow dory.

"Let's go below so I can put these groceries away," he said and disappeared down the slender stairwell.

I hesitated to follow him but willed myself onward. "Ready or not," I whispered.

Henri set the bags on the kitchen counter and unpacked various cheeses, olives, and cured meats. He stacked the food in the narrow fridge built into the cupboards, then made room for a few bottles of Perrier. The kitchen was a modern, efficient space—plenty of stainless steel and rich, mahogany wood—and remarkably nicer than what I was used to back at the trailer.

Next to the kitchen was the sitting room. It had a bright, inviting feel to it, which I wouldn't have expected inside a boat. There was a white couch built into the wall, lined with navy pillows with little red anchors stitched on them. Beside the couch were matching chairs and a narrow coffee table piled high with fashion magazines.

"Don't be shy," Henri said. "Take a look around while I finish up here."

I walked through the sitting area to the back of the boat and peeked into the two berths. One had a single bed and the other had bunk beds. Each room was decorated with a red comforter, a white pillow, and a tidy book shelf next to a wall lamp. I assumed that the room at the other end of the boat was the master suite where his parents slept.

To the right was a small bathroom painted floor-to-ceiling white, with a cluster of lilies in a glass vase next to the sink. Natural light entered the room through a porthole near the ceiling.

I returned to the sitting room just as Henri placed a chilled bottle of champagne on the counter.

"You like champagne, I assume. It's all Stella ever drinks," he said rather definitively, already working the cork.

"Um—sure" I said, trying to recall if I'd ever drank champagne before, but then remembered how I'd snuck a glass of it at my cousin's wedding when I was thirteen.

He finally popped the cork and poured me a glass, then grabbed for himself a Budweiser from the fridge. My mouth watered as he poured the beer into a chilled mug, but I resolved to be polite and drink the champagne that had been offered to me.

"Cheers," he said, and we clinked our glasses together.

Henri eyed me in a peculiar way as if I'd just asked him a question and he was contemplating how to answer it. He took another sip of beer.

"Do you *really* want to go sailing with me, Odette?"

He was direct, but the answer came easily to me.

"Yes, I do. I also want to apologize for not showing up the other day. It's just that—"

"Enough said." He shrugged, accepting my apology.

We stood facing each other in the confined space below deck. I grew nervous he would start asking questions that I would only trip over trying to answer. I took another sip of champagne and fiddled with the dishcloth on the counter.

I finally said, "It's such a beautiful day outside—do you mind if we sit in the sun?"

"Of course, your lead," he said, waving toward the stairs.

We walked up to the deck and sat side by side on a bench near the captain's wheel. I was acutely aware of just how close Henri was sitting to me. So close that if we were to both turn our heads at the same time, I was sure our noses would touch. But for now we looked straight ahead, following the lines of the drifting boats out on the water.

"Are you enjoying your vacation so far?" I asked.

"Yes. It's quiet here, which helps get my mind off work. Life can get stressful when you're responsible for other people's money."

His words made me think of Ma.

"I knew a guy, another fund manager like me, who had a heart attack while working at his desk. Can you believe it?"

"That's awful," I said, having never heard of anything like that happening before. I thought desk jobs were supposed to be easy money, at least that's what Ma always told me. "Does it worry you? I mean, would you rather find something else to do?"

"Odette, I'm afraid I wasn't raised to think that work's supposed to be enjoyable," he said flatly. "But yes, it does make me rethink things from time to time." He glanced up at the clouds reshaping overhead. "The problem is that we get used to the pattern of life. We don't know how we arrived here, but we just keep chasing our tail around in a circle. Do you know what the definition of insanity is? Waking up and doing the same rituals every day but expecting a different result."

I studied Henri's strong jaw and the way the skin around his eyes began to age him. I couldn't let him know how much I agreed with what he was saying because it would undoubtedly start the unravelling of the lies I'd been feeding him these past few days.

He turned toward me, and I looked away.

"I apologize for ranting in such a way. Forgive me," he said.

"Don't worry about it," I said and took another drink of champagne.

He kept his gaze on me and then asked, "When would you like to go sailing?"

"Um—let me think," I said as I ran through my work schedule in my head, remembering that I was going to be free on the weekend since I worked the last one. "Saturday?"

"Brilliant."

"What do I need to bring?"

"Nothing—just show up this time."

I forced another gulp of champagne and tried not to wince at the taste. "Well, I hate to drink and run, but I have to get ready for work. Not everyone's on vacation around here, you know."

"Let me drive you home?" he offered as I stood up to leave.

"No—I mean, no, thank you. I have to run a few errands first, so it's just easier if I walk."

"Okay," he said, disappointed, then offered, "At least let me be a gentleman and escort you to the end of the dock?"

"That would be nice," I said, relieved that he didn't pursue it any further.

Henri jumped from the boat to the dock and tugged the rope to close the gap. He took my hand, and I easily managed the jump. We walked slowly back toward the club, enjoying the laziness of the hot afternoon and lingering in each other's company.

Ahead of us, an older couple carefully descended the steps leading from the club to the dock. The man wore a navy captain's hat and held a pipe between his teeth. He had a lame right leg that made him shuffle when he walked, and his white hair and beard gave him the air of a bona fide sea captain.

His wife walked daintily beside him, her arm through his. Her shoulder-length hair framed her soft eyes and tanned skin. She wore a white and navy striped shirt and white capri pants.

"Ahoy, mate," the older man yelled, waving his pipe as he approached us.

"Good day, sir," Henri answered politely.

"Aren't you the Livingston boy—Charles and Patricia's son?"

"Why, yes. How did you know?" Henri asked.

"We just met your parents inside the club. Lovely people they are. And speaking of lovely, who is this charming lady by your side?"

"Odette Leblanc. Nice to meet you," I said as I shook their hands.

"*Enchanté*," the woman said. "I'm Claudia, and this is my husband, Barney. From your last name, I'd guess you're from around here?"

"Born and raised in The Point."

"Oh, how wonderful! I'm originally from Shediac. We're practically neighbours," she said, clasping my hand in hers. "We don't live here anymore, though. We spend the winters down south and only return home for the beautiful summers."

Barney shook Henri's hand. "Looks like you snatched yourself a lovely Acadian girl, just like my dear Claudia. You hold on to her, young man," he said, then shuffled off toward his boat.

I was still blushing when Henri and I reached the end of the dock, and I quickly took the steps and headed across the parking lot. "See you Saturday," I yelled back to him.

"Is that a guarantee?"

"Yes."

I arrived home a few minutes later with time to spare before my shift at the store. Ma was in the living room, drinking gin and playing cards with a man I didn't recognize. Sophie was in the kitchen, frying an egg. I didn't like the way the man looked up from his cards every so often to watch Sophie standing at the stove, so I stayed in the kitchen with her until she finished her meal.

When Sophie finally left to meet a friend, I went to my room to change my clothes for work and pack my apron in my purse. Then I made the bed, tidied the stack of novels on the floor, hung up a sweater and pair of pants that were slung over the desk chair, and opened the window a crack to let in the fresh evening air.

I was procrastinating. I didn't want to go to work tonight, but I had little choice. A job was a job, just like Henri said. There was no way of escaping it.

Bing bong.

When I entered the store, I gave a half wave to Laurent standing behind the counter. He looked up and barely acknowledged me with his dark, complacent eyes. We soon settled into our roles, keeping busy by treading through the constant flow of customers.

A few hours later, I took a short break to call Anne from the phone in the back room. I sipped a coffee, trying to stay alert.

"Allô," I heard her say.

"*Salut, la princesse.*"

"Hey, I was just thinking about you," she said, which happened all the time when one of us was about to call the other one. "How's work?"

"Not much new to report here," I said. "But you'll never guess what I did today?"

"Um—sleep, like you do every day," she answered sarcastically.

"Not today. I went to the club and drank champagne on Henri's sailboat."

"What!" she yelled through the phone. "Tell me what happened right now. I *need* details!"

I started to laugh, realizing how fun it was to be the one with the drama for once. "I couldn't sleep so I went for a walk, and that's when I met up with Henri at the club. He invited me onto his boat, and we talked for a bit—it was nice. He wants me to go sailing with him this Saturday."

Anne squealed into the phone. "Finally," she sighed. "Odette's got a boyfriend! Thank fuck."

"He's not my boyfriend," I insisted.

"*Whatever.*"

Laurent served an influx of customers and lingered around the front counter, cleaning up. When it slowed down a bit, he came out to the floor and swept up a pile of sand carried in that day by hundreds of pairs of flip-flops.

I kept busy walking up and down the aisles, shooting a laser gun at product bar codes. Magic Wick fire starter, Jiffy popcorn, Mr. Noodle instant soup, Rocket Fireworks sparklers, Purina canned dog food. When I finished, I passed the gun to Laurent at the cash, and he held it for a moment in his long fingers before placing it under the counter.

Then came the early morning lull, and the store was deathly quiet except for the hum of the coolers along the back wall. I grabbed a copy of the *Times & Transcript* and took a seat on the stool at the coffee counter to read the headlines.

"TWO MORE CANADIAN SOLDIERS DIE IN AFGHANISTAN," I read aloud, shaking my head. "I just don't get it."

Laurent grunted. I peeked at him over the top of the newspaper, and he was staring at me. I raised my eyebrows as if to say *speak*, even though I suspected he wouldn't say more than a few words.

"What do you know?" he asked boldly.

I stared back at him, unsure of how to answer. "I know what I read."

Laurent looked annoyed. "You do not understand war—a game led by madmen to steal civil and political rights of the innocent. There is no honour in killing your own people. Tell me, how can violence end violence?"

I dropped the newspaper to my lap. His words were erratic, but I didn't care. I needed to know more. "Was there war in the Congo?"

"I am not from Republic of the Congo. I am Rwandan."

My mouth went dry. I immediately understood where this conversation was going, and I wasn't sure I wanted to go there. Laurent must have escaped the Rwandan genocide by fleeing to the Congo before immigrating to Canada. I wished I could take

back what I had asked and steer the conversation toward something else. But I couldn't stop myself.

"What happened?"

He stared at me with unfocused eyes as if he was reading his own thoughts.

"I was forced to leave Kigali. The city was controlled by violence, and there was nothing for me there. I crossed the border to the Congo, walking for miles along a migration path. Then I found work in a gold mine, filling trucks with bags of crushed rock brought to us by battered mules led by children with missing fingers. I was a prisoner, again. Later, I escaped to a refugee camp, and your government helped me to come here."

I digested Laurent's story, unravelling the mystery of his former life. Is this what happened on the other side of the world? Who was watching out for these people—these refugees of war?

"Laurent?"

His eyes met mine.

"I'm glad you're here. I mean—safe with us."

His eyes softened for a moment, then grew heated again. "Do you know the difference between a Tutsi and a Hutu?"

"No."

"This is why I am in Canada. You would not kill a man because of the colour of his skin."

I looked down at the newspaper, unsure of what to say or do. But when I looked back up and met Laurent's eyes, it sent a chill down the back of my neck like walking through the belly of a ghost.

Encounter

I awoke to the sound of the alarm clock and slammed my hand on the off button. It had been a restless sleep, and the thought of going to work tonight was the last thing I wanted to do. But I willed myself to get up, knowing that tomorrow I could sleep in and enjoy the afternoon sun. Tomorrow, I would be sailing with Henri.

I moved slowly through the motions of getting ready for work, even contemplating wearing yesterday's outfit so easily within reach on the back of the chair. But instead, I made myself sift through the closet to find a clean pair of black jeans and a blue shirt with silver petal-shaped buttons I'd sewn on.

I packed my things for work, grabbed an apple from the fridge, and headed out the screen door into the warm evening air.

Bing bong.

"What's up, buttercup?" Ted asked as I entered the store.

"You're in a good mood," I said dryly.

"Just felt like saying hi," he replied defensively.

I felt bad for always being so judgmental around Ted and not giving him a chance. Some days he was actually a nice guy, although most of the time it was like trying to reason with a garden hose.

"What's the news around here?" I asked.

"Um—there's *definitely* a beach party happening tonight. A load of hot chicks stopped in a few minutes ago," he said, smiling

to himself. "Oh yah—Ronald called to say he'd be dropping by later. Another slushie machine demo, you think?"

I smiled despite myself at the poke at Ronald. Sometimes Ted surprised me.

"Well then, if Ronald's on his way over, let's get this place cleaned up," I said.

I stayed at the cash serving customers while Ted made fresh coffee and restocked the hotdog rotisserie. When he finished, I asked him to bring out the Heinz shipment and create a display of tomato soup cans at the front of the aisle. I knew it would keep him busy for at least the next hour, stacking each one of those cans on top of the other.

It was a typical Friday night at the store, and the road buzzed with traffic. Children arrived with handfuls of change to buy ice cream sandwiches; teenagers came in for Doritos and rolling papers hastily grabbed from the carton near the register; and parents, always in a hurry, stopped in for milk and toilet paper.

Finally, a familiar face came into the store.

"*Allô, Sophie, ça va?*" I said, happy to see her.

Sophie glared at me as if to say *stay out of my business*. She was definitely in one of her moods again.

"I'm fine," she mumbled and went to the back of the store.

I peeked out the front window to see who she'd come with. There was a Honda Civic with tinted windows and a racing spoiler parked at the edge of the lot. The engine revved loudly, a symptom of sporty cars that I never understood. I couldn't see who was inside, but noticed a curl of smoke escaping from the driver's window.

Sophie returned to the cash and dropped on the counter a bag of barbeque chips and two bottles of Pepsi. I rang in the order while she opened her change purse and handed me the money.

"What are your plans tonight?" I asked casually as if it didn't really matter to me.

"Drive-in."

"Anything good playing?" I prodded, as I counted her change.

"It's supposed to be *Fast and Furious* 6. I don't know who's in it, but André really wants to see it."

"Sounds like fun. Have a good time," I said as sincerely as possible.

"We will," she said, her mood starting to lighten.

She paused for a moment as if she was going to ask me something, then turned to leave. I watched her sprint over to the car and get into the passenger side. Before she even had time to shut the door, the car tires squealed forward.

I rolled my eyes and tried not to think about Sophie for now. Instead, I stared at the clock above the door. The second hand made one full rotation around the clock face. It was only 10:14 p.m., but already it felt like I'd worked the whole night.

Then Ronald arrived.

"Odette," he said, greeting me stiffly.

"*Allô*," I answered, standing a little straighter.

He marched across the floor until he reached the aisle where Ted stood reading a magazine.

"Ted, come here a minute. I need to talk to you," he said, waving him to the front of the store.

Ted looked up from his reading, his tall frame towering over the aisles. He walked toward us, and I noticed Ronald take a more assertive stance.

"Listen, Ted, I came in tonight specifically to talk to you."

"Awesome...am I getting a raise?"

Ronald didn't laugh. In fact, the comment seemed to infuriate him. "Are you kidding me? You've already given yourself a raise—about a hundred bucks a week!"

Ted raised his eyebrows so high that his pale forehead wrinkled like soft dough. "Whoa, what are you trying to say?"

"Listen, I know it was you, you little *shit*!" Ronald said, bits of spit forming at the corners of his mouth.

"For weeks there's been money missing from the count at the end of the night. It took me a while to prove it, to figure out exactly *how* you were doing it, but I'm on to you now. Guess what, the

camera doesn't lie, *shithead*," he said smugly, pointing up at the ceiling.

"You don't have any proof that I stole out of the *till*."

Ronald's eyes widened like golf balls. "You're right! You didn't steal out of the till; you stole it from the floor. I caught on to your sneaky trick after replaying the tape twenty times. You waited for a customer to hand you a twenty, then you'd grab it with your right hand and let it fall to the ground while you counted out the change with your left hand. Then once the customer left, you'd casually bend down behind the counter, like you were tying your laces, and shove the bill down your boot."

"Is this true?" I asked.

Both Ted and Ronald turned to me like they'd forgotten I was still in the room.

"Were you stealing from the store right in front of me?" I asked angrily.

"This guy's *fucked*."

"I'll show you fucked. One call to the police and your ass is in jail, punk!"

"Whatever, I'm outta here!" Ted yelled and ripped off his apron as he turned for the door.

"One more thing," Ronald said, drawing in a deep breath. "You're fired, *fuck face*!"

We watched Ted leave the store, his heavy boots taking him across the parking lot in long strides until he finally disappeared around the corner.

I stayed safely behind the counter as Ronald paced the floor in front of me. He balled his fists and shook his head from side to side, breathing heavily through his nostrils. He muttered something about how the goddamned immigrants the welfare office sent over were ten times more reliable than the lazy, long-haired kids today with no respect for authority.

He finally walked up to me and slapped both hands on the glass counter. "Mark my words, Odette. There's nothing I hate more than a liar and a thief."

Morning came, and I gladly left the store behind me. The night's drama between Ted and Ronald had given me too much nervous energy to burn off.

When I reached the beach, I kicked off my shoes and walked toward the water, but then stopped when I saw a flicker of movement ahead of me. I couldn't quite make out what it was in the dull light, so I advanced slowly, keeping my eye on the source of the movement until it finally materialized. It was the doryman's white cat playing tag with the incoming waves.

Once I saw her, I instinctively called her to me, and her ears perked up. She froze, assessing the situation, then recognized me and sprinted forward. I bent down and held out my hand, and she rubbed her head against my fingers, purring unabashedly. I picked her up and held her against me with one hand while scratching underneath her chin with the other.

"She really likes you," a voice said.

Startled, I spun around to see the doryman standing just off to the right. I stared at him and could think of absolutely nothing to say.

"Snow, I do believe you're showing off," he said to the cat.

His words gave me just enough time to find my voice.

"Snow? So *that's* your name?" I said, looking down at the cat cradled in my arms.

Her ears perked up at the sound of her own name. She stuck out her chin for more attention and showed a slight curl of a smile on her thin feline lips.

"Yes, it's Snow because on a good day her fur is actually white. But since we've been coming to the beach in the mornings, she's turned a little mangy," he said guiltily.

I examined the cat and noticed her little paws were caked with dirt. I let her down gently, and as soon as she touched the sand, she flew off down the beach.

"I'm Odette," I said to the doryman, and he raised his eyebrows.

"Like the swan?"

"Pardon?" I asked, not understanding his comment.

"Never mind—it's a pleasure to meet you, Odette. My name's Ben."

"Ben," I repeated a little too quickly.

"You sound surprised?"

"No, it's nothing," I said, thinking how satisfying it was to finally know the doryman's real name.

"What brings you to the beach at this hour?"

"Um—I guess I'm just here to unwind after work," I said with a shrug.

"And what *type* of work do you do that keeps you out until six in the morning?" he asked with a mischievous smile.

"Trust me, it's not that interesting. I'm the night supervisor at the convenience store in town. Actually, there was a bit of action tonight. Someone got fired for stealing."

"Wow, that's impressive for a night's work."

"What about you? Why are you here?" I asked, even though I had pretty much pieced it all together, but he didn't need to know that.

Ben sighed and ran his fingers through his hair. "Well, Snow and I come to land almost every morning to get some exercise. That's my boat over there—it's where I live," he said, pointing to the *Maine Voyage* with the pirate flag, which I already knew was his. "She's a good boat—we've been through a lot together. Bought her a few years back from a retired fisherman," he said nostalgically.

"How long are you here for?"

"Till the end of the month, then I start my next research project."

"Oh," I said, feeling disappointed that he was already talking about leaving. "What do you research?"

"Anything and everything that involves the ocean," he answered.

"Are you working on a project right now?"

"You bet. I was hired by the planning commission to build

a climate change flood model for the area. Did you know that Pointe-du-Chêne is in a high-risk flood zone? Where we're standing right now could be under water in the next fifty years, or after the next big storm."

"Are you serious?"

"Afraid so. The shoreline's changing, and the banks are eroding. That's where I come in."

"I had no idea..." I said, completely surprised. "But now that you mention it, I have noticed a change—the patterns in the sand are different."

"That's it, Odette. You're witnessing the transformation. Good or bad, it's coming."

We both stared down at the lines in the sand by our feet. Seconds passed between us without exchange.

"Ben?" I asked.

He looked over at me.

"When I introduced myself to you earlier...why did you say my name reminded you of a swan?"

"Oh, that," he said with a smile. "It's no secret. I just haven't met anyone in real life named Odette. The only one I know of is in *Swan Lake*. You know the story, right?"

"Of course," I said, but then sheepishly asked, "What's it about again?"

Ben laughed. "It's a ballet—a very famous one by Tchaikovsky. Odette was a princess who turned into a swan because an evil sorcerer placed a curse on her. By day she was a swan, and only by night could she turn back into her human form. But as luck would have it, she was actually a pretty good swan and became popular among the animals in the forest. They even referred to her as Queen Swan. The only problem was that she grew lonely and longed for the spell to be broken by a man who would pledge to be faithful to her forever."

"How'd it end?" I asked, wrapped up in his storytelling.

"Well, like all good love stories, she met her Prince Charming, and he pledged his love forever. But he was tricked into falling in

love with someone else disguised as Odette, and so unknowingly, broke his vow to her. In the end, when he realized what he'd done, he searched the forest high and low until he found her by the lake. In the ultimate sacrifice, she decided that the only way to be free of the curse was to die, and the Prince was so overcome with grief that he drowned in the lake alongside her."

"Oh, that's sad," I said, frowning.

"Yes, but the silver lining was that they ascended into heaven together, united in eternal love," he said, half-joking.

I imagined the tragic romance in my mind, but at the same time felt quite pleased to know that my name was linked to such an important ballet.

"She was a complex character," Ben said thoughtfully. "One persona by day, another by night."

The irony of his words was not lost on me. I, too, was in the middle of an identity crisis growing more sordid each day.

An ocean wave flooded the shoreline, then trickled back out to sea.

"Would you like me to tell you a love story?" I asked, looking up at him.

Ben seemed surprised. "I'd love nothing more."

"It's a story about the undying love of Gabriel and Evangeline. They arrived here, on the East Coast, with their families from France to start a new life. But in 1755, they were exiled by the English in the Great Upheaval—sent away on separate ships headed to the United States.

"Evangeline was separated from her true love, Gabriel, and spent her whole life looking for him, never giving up until eventually, old and committed to a nunnery, she found him amongst the sick. He died in her arms."

Ben looked moved by the story. "It's sad, yet poetic."

"Do you believe in true love? I mean—the kind where they don't die in the end?"

"I don't know," he answered. "Maybe you only know for sure when it happens—when you meet that right person for you."

"I suppose so."

Ben stood quietly beside me, gazing out at the sunrise. I wanted to know more about him, about this man who spent day after day on his boat. His way of life intrigued me. Grand-papa loved his boat too, but he still preached that God wasn't making any more waterfront property, so buy it up while you could.

"If you don't mind me asking, do you ever feel disconnected from the world by living on your boat? I mean, by not owning any land?"

"No, I don't think so," he answered simply. "I've been out on the water for so long now that I kind of need it—like it's part of me. You know that if you stare at the waves long enough, they'll start to speak to you."

I didn't follow and looked at him to explain.

"Each wave rolling in is like a worry or hope entering your mind. Sometimes it rolls in calmly, other times it drives you mad like a storm. The tricky part is not to hold on to the destructive thoughts. Instead, treat them like jellyfish. When you see one coming, just stop and observe it until the current takes it away."

Ben appeared wise beyond his years. We stood together, both deep in thought, our feet embedded in countless grains of sand. A tangle of knotted kelp blew past us and caught in the tall grass at the back of the beach. Overhead, a mouthy seagull glided in a pocket of wind toward the wharf.

"Sun's up. Time to head back to the boat or else I'll turn into a pumpkin."

"Wait—I know this one. *Cinderella*?"

"Very good!" he said. "At least you're up to speed on your children's stories."

"It was nice to meet you, Ben, and you too, Snow," I said, nodding to the little cat.

"Another time?"

"Definitely."

Ben waved goodbye and walked over to his red dory. Sweeping his little companion up in his arms, he placed her in the boat

and began the laborious task of rowing back to his home on the water.

I turned away, ever so slowly, and retreated home to sleep the day away.

To dream.

Sailing

“*B*onjour, Monsieur Léger,” Ma cooed from the side of the road.

Monsieur Léger tipped his cap and smiled. “*Mesdemoiselles*, what can I supply you with today?”

Ma looked into the back of the van, trying to decide. “I’ll take six market size,” she said.

“*Avec plaisir.*”

For as long as I could remember, Monsieur Léger had been a permanent fixture on the side of the road, selling cooked lobster out of the back of his van. The old man rose from his plastic lawn chair, neatly folding Saturday’s newspaper and placing it on the flattened seat cushion. Then he hoisted his stubby legs onto the bumper and climbed inside.

There were at least five coolers packed full of orange lobsters. Mr. Léger carefully selected six specimens and wrapped them in newspaper before placing them in a white grocery bag. He gestured for me to take the bag from him so he could climb backwards out of the van. When his feet hit the ground, he wiped his wet hands on his navy work pants and reached into his back pocket for his overstuffed wallet.

Ma opened her purse and counted exactly thirty dollars. She’d been lucky last night at bingo, and a Win Day meant treats for everyone. Tonight she was hosting one of her infrequent family suppers for me, Sophie, Natalie and the kids.

Monsieur Léger took the money and grinned, exposing empty spots where his teeth should be. Ma said something about him

being a charmer, which he liked very much.

With our supper in hand, we headed back toward the trailer, stopping only to pick up a dozen crusty rolls and two cold cans of Pepsi to drink on the way.

Ma lit a smoke and took a long drag while I carried the bags.

"I didn't see Sophie this morning when I got up. Is she going to be at supper tonight?" I asked.

"Who knows?" Ma answered cynically. "She's on her own schedule. Comes and goes as she pleases. You and Natalie did the same thing to me—it's called being a teenager."

"Yah, I guess," I said, but the notion of it sat uneasy with me.

"There's a part-time job down at the grocery store. It would keep her busy a couple days a week, and she'd finally start bringing in some money. It's goddamn time she stopped sucking the tit off me. I'm too old for that shit," Ma said. She took another drag from her cigarette, then cleared her throat with a cough.

"I hope she finds work, too," I said, thinking that a job would be the best way to keep her out of trouble for the rest of the summer.

We walked a bit farther, but all the while I could tell Ma was staring at me.

"What?" I asked suspiciously.

"What's with you? I can tell you got somethin' on your mind."

She was right. I'd been daydreaming about sailing with Henri, and it was getting harder to conceal my nervous anticipation about spending the afternoon with him on his yacht.

Of course I'd been out on the water before, but in no spectacular way. A few times Grand-papa had ferried me and my sisters over to Shediak Island for a picnic lunch. We'd sit on the soft turf around the peat bog, scanning the trees for eagle nests and digging in the dirt for fabled arrowheads. Then we'd move to the beach and eat peanut butter sandwiches and drink lemonade from Grand-papa's work thermos until we got tired and boarded the boat to go home.

"Actually, I'm going sailing with a friend this afternoon," I

said, hoping she wouldn't make a big deal out of it.

"What kind of *friend* of yours has a sailboat?"

"Just someone I met at the bar this week. He's here with his family on vacation, and I thought it would be nice to show him around. He's the one who suggested it," I said abruptly, my words not coming out as smoothly as I'd wanted them to.

"Sounds like some kinda rich boy. Why would he want anything to do with you?"

We reached the front steps of the trailer, and Ma walked inside, letting the screen door slam shut behind her and leaving me standing outside holding the grocery bags.

I adjusted the weight of the backpack on my shoulder as I walked to the sailing club. I'd probably packed way too much stuff, but after an hour of obsessing over what to bring, I decide to shove everything in my bag and hope for the best.

I cut across the parking lot toward the floating dock and spotted Henri right away. He was on the boat fiddling with some ropes while Stella and Sean stood talking off to the side. I preened myself one last time to make sure everything was as it ought to be. The day's goal was simple: try to blend in.

"Hello, miss," said a familiar voice from the steps of the club.

I turned to see Gesner walking toward me, and judging by the time of day, I guessed he was just about finished his shift.

"*Bonjour, Gesner.* How are you?"

"*Pas mal, toi?*" he said with a generous smile.

"Fine, thanks."

"*Il fait beau.* It's going to be a beautiful evening, too. I can feel it in my bones."

"Thanks for the weather report. I'll need it since I'm just about to go sailing on Mr. and Mrs. Livingston's boat."

"Well, aren't you lucky," he said. "I always wondered what it would be like out there on one of them luxury yachts. Spent all my time on navy ships."

"I'll give you a full briefing when I get back."

"Lookin' forward to it," he said then added, "Now you be careful out there. You got that fisherman instinct, so use it."

"I will," I said, feeling more confident than before, but still a little anxious about seeing Henri again and pretending to know my way around a yacht.

No one noticed when I walked up to the boat, so I managed a weak hello. Sean heard me and came over to offer his hand to help me aboard.

"Well, hello, local! Glad you could join us," he said as I stepped onto the boat.

He sneaked a look back at Henri and winked, and I pretended not to notice.

"Glad to be here," I said.

"The pleasure is all mine," he answered in an overly formal tone and gave me a half bow.

When Stella saw me, she came over to welcome me aboard.

"Hi, Stella," I said, happy to know there was another girl on board who likely didn't know any more than I did about sailing.

"*Bonjour, Mademoiselle*," she replied with an effortless French accent to which I wasn't accustomed.

"*Parles-tu français?*" I asked, surprised.

"*Mais oui*. I studied fashion design in Paris, where, by the way, I had the time of my life. It's quite an inspired city, don't you think?" she asked, as if everyone had spent time in Paris and would therefore have an opinion about it.

"Um..." I said just as Henri intercepted the conversation by grabbing me by the shoulders and kissing me on each cheek as the French do.

"Hello," he said, still holding on to my arms. "You're just in time. I'm almost finished with the rigging, then we set sail. Do you want to help?"

I nodded willingly, happy to have something to do.

"Come on, then," he said and motioned for me to follow him across the deck.

I searched desperately for something recognizable from the sailing book I'd read at home. With a little luck, I would be able to say something relevant that would make it sound like I really knew what I was doing here.

"I hope you realize that even though I invited you to sail as my guest, I'm going to put you to work. This is a fifty-foot cruiser, and to sail her, we need all hands on deck."

"Of course," I said eagerly, "I want to help, so put me to work."

He stopped and looked at me as if I was joking.

"What?" I asked self-consciously.

"It's just that most girls only want to come on board to work on their tan. They're not so interested in actually sailing with me."

"I see," I said, pursing my lips together as I considered what he was saying. "So what you're telling me is that you regularly invite girls on board just to have them hang around in their bikinis."

"No, I didn't mean it that way. I was speaking hypothetically, of course," he said with a sly grin. "Come on, let's get to work."

I followed behind Henri as he moved around the deck for a last-minute inspection of the sail. We attached clips to the control lines and tinkered with the tackle holding the position of the boom and the shape of the mainsail. I watched the muscle memory in Henri's hands as his fingers effortlessly opened and closed latches and tied knots—his face sure and steady.

The more we worked together, the more I started to relax and enjoy myself. I took a moment to admire the exotic wood, polished chrome, and the colossal sail towering so high above me. I was finally experiencing what I'd only memorized from a book.

"Hey, you almost ready over there?" Sean called out from across the deck, where he was reading the sailing charts.

"All set," Henri yelled back, and we walked over to see how Sean was coming along.

"I'm going over the conditions now—no need to worry. From what I see, the tide and winds are more than manageable."

"What do you think about the course?" Henri asked.

"It's a perfect day for a sail around Shediak Island. I'm work-

ing out the turning points now. We'll get to see what this cruiser is really made of—tack and jibe, tack and jibe!" he shouted excitedly.

"He's *so* into this," Henri leaned in and whispered to me.

"And you?" I asked.

"Me too, of course. Sailing is my family's legacy. My grandfather actually won the Newport Bermuda Race in 1968."

"I'm impressed," I said, but Henri seemed distracted.

We were finally ready to set sail, and everyone gathered around to review their roles for the afternoon. Henri was to be our helmsman, responsible for steering the boat. Sean would be responsible for trimming the sail and adjusting the centreboard and weight to keep the boat balanced.

I was getting excited as our sailing adventure was suddenly becoming a reality, and I remembered a term I'd just read about.

"We'll be counting on you, Sean, to get us through the eye of the wind!" I said enthusiastically.

Henri turned to look at me, and Sean and Stella stared at me inquisitively. I smiled sheepishly, my heart thumping like a bass drum in a marching band. I wished for a better filter between my mind and my mouth. If I kept making stupid comments like that, no one would ever believe I was a seasoned sailor.

Luckily, Sean loved how I'd singled him out as the keeper of our safety, and he reciprocated with a rallying cry, "Hell yes, I can get us through anything!"

We all laughed, and Henri picked up where he'd left off with the orders. He assigned the girls with the job of listening to his commands and responding accordingly, which sounded fine by me. Equally important, we were responsible for ensuring the general merriment of the crew, or in other words, hospitality. This I could handle.

As the boys prepared to set sail, Stella and I went to the cabin below to gather some refreshments. I brought my backpack with me and took out my camera to keep with me for later.

As Stella was packing a small cooler with drinks and snacks, she looked like she had something on her mind, then she nar-

rowed her green eyes curiously at me.

"I was thinking about going shopping tomorrow. What boutique did you say you worked at again?"

I'd been dreading that question ever since the night at the bar when Henri suggested I take Stella on a shopping trip.

"Oh, it's just a little shop that probably wouldn't interest you too much. We're always—um—restocking and never seem to be able to keep up with the latest trends." I laughed nervously, trying to think of a way to divert the question. "Maybe, instead, we could check out a few of the better boutiques in Moncton...grab some lunch, too?"

I hoped desperately that she would take the bait because I didn't know what else to say. She stared at me like she was scrutinizing the offer, and I wasn't entirely sure she believed my story.

Finally, she shrugged and said, "Sure."

Henri placed his steady hands on the wheel, steering the cruiser out of its berth past the other boats at the club. He had to make sure to stay within the buoys marking the channel through the breakwater. I watched him as he stood composed at the helm, calculating the distance ahead of him.

We cruised using the motor for now, so there wasn't much work for the rest of us to do until reaching open water. We leaned against the railing, watching the passing boats. The sun scorched the sky, and only a few chubby clouds hung over the town like smoke over a pipe. The breeze blowing in off the water felt cool and humid, and I shifted my face toward the sun to feel the heat again.

Then I heard Stella's dry laugh, and I turned to see her pointing at one of the boats.

"What a dreadful excuse for a boat. I'm surprised it even floats!" she said.

Everyone laughed except me. I was embarrassed and turned away from the converted fishing boat until we were a safe distance

away. When I finally looked back, I saw the little white cat sunning herself on the deck with one paw hung over the edge, staring at me.

We were finally cruising out at sea and gaining speed with the sail hoisted high above us. The sun warmed my cheeks, and I didn't mind the ocean spray because it cooled my skin. I looked over the railing and could hardly believe how a boat this size could so easily cut through the oncoming waves. At times, we tilted at such extreme angles that it felt like we'd roll all the way over. My heart raced alongside the boat as we moved faster and faster across the water.

Suddenly, I felt overwhelmed by the experience, realizing for the first time that I'd been entirely restricted to my small town for all of my twenty-three years. No planes or major car rides to speak of. I'd lived in the same place, the same dot on the map, my whole life. I'd never even travelled outside of New Brunswick.

Something awakened inside of me. I felt a rift opening up, a chasm of acceptance for new things and new possibilities. From this perspective out on the water, the world seemed bigger to me now and moved faster than on dry land. I felt walls of doubt and defeat, ones I didn't even know I'd built up around me for protection, start to flake off under the hot sun.

I reached in my pocket for my camera so I could capture this moment forever. Sean was gazing up at the imposing sail as it caught the full wind in its belly; Stella sat across from him with a soft smile, her thoughts far away; and Henri stood firmly at the helm, eyes focused straight ahead. I would be forever indebted to these carefree people who had unknowingly given me the most amazing lesson. They'd shown me there was more to life than just working and worrying about the future all the time. There was time for leisure and living in the moment, for complete and utter abandon.

Suddenly, I was drawn to Henri. I walked up to him and bold-

ly linked my arm through his. He looked at me and smiled.

"This is amazing, Henri," I said.

Henri leaned down and kissed the top of my head. "You're amazing," he whispered.

And that's when I knew I was in love...with sailing.

As we made a course around Shediac Island, Sean adjusted the sail to allow us to drop speed to four knots so we could relax and lounge on deck. I pointed out an eagle's nest on the island, and everyone was thoroughly impressed. I explained the Acadian and Aboriginal history of the area, things I'd learned in school, and everyone seemed curious enough to know more, so I played the role of storyteller as we sailed back toward the club.

The excitement of our sailing day finally came to an end when Henri turned on the boat motor. We gathered around the wheel as we cruised back to the club, raising our drinks in a victory cheer as Sean recounted exaggerated details of our solo race. We laughed and patted each other on the back like a real crew and let the wind whip our hair around our faces.

The boat slowed to a crawl as it passed through the breakwater and inched toward the dock. It was getting late, and the club's security lights illuminated the building like a beacon after a long sail. We tied the boat to the dock and packed away the last remaining gear before finally stepping off the boat.

The day's adventure and the fresh air had wiped me out completely. I thanked everyone for bringing me along with them, saying it was the best time I'd ever had sailing, which was the truth even if it had been the one and only time I'd ever been on a yacht.

Stella reminded me about our shopping trip, and I told her I'd meet her at 9:30 a.m. the next morning at the club. Henri seemed pleased by this, and I did my best to conceal my apprehension. Sean and Stella walked off toward the club while Henri and I lingered back.

I knew what was on his mind, and I wasn't sure how I was

going to answer it.

"Will I see you again?" he asked point blank.

"I hope so."

Henri leaned toward me, but a familiar voice called out to us, and we moved apart.

"Ahoy, mate!"

A bearded man with a slight limp walked down the dock with his wife at his side. Henri was the first to recognize the pair.

"Good evening, Barney and Claudia," he said politely.

Barney removed his sailor's hat and swatted Henri playfully on the arm. "How were the conditions today?"

"Wonderful—a perfect day out on the water," Henri answered, looking over at me.

Barney nodded approvingly. "Good, good. We're thinking of taking a cruise over to Prince Edward Island in the morning. Going to hit the hay early tonight so we can rise with the sun. Looks like we're set for good weather," he said, gesturing toward the red horizon.

Claudia squinted at me as she suppressed a yawn with the back of her hand. "We'll see you kids another time. Good night."

"Good night," Henri said as the older couple walked away.

Once again, Henri and I were alone.

"I have to go. I'm late for lobster supper," I said, turning to leave.

"Sounds like a fine feast."

"It's a rare family night."

"About my question..." he called out.

"I'll see you tomorrow when I meet Stella."

Henri seemed satisfied with the promise of another rendezvous, and let it be.

The next morning I arrived early at the club to meet Stella for our shopping date. I'd spent last night searching online for impressive boutiques in Moncton to take her to. The problem was that I

rarely shopped anywhere other than second-hand stores or the Champlain Place Mall, so I had nothing to go by. I finally found three hopeful places that carried the designer names I recognized from the ads in the fashion magazines I read at work. I would just have to cross my fingers that Stella would like where I was going to take her.

I kept the shopping trip a secret, especially from Anne, who would have felt completely left out if I didn't bring her. It was less complicated this way. Stella thought of me as a cultured girl who worked in a local boutique, and I wasn't ready to blow my cover just yet.

I decided to play it safe with my choice of outfit for the day. There was no way I was going to compete with Stella's wardrobe or with what I was about to witness in the shops, so I wore a simple white skirt with an airy purple blouse and white sandals. I had no brand-name clothes, but everything fit me perfectly thanks to my tailoring skills using Ma's old sewing machine.

I saw the jeep parked at the club, but Stella was nowhere in sight. I hesitated to walk inside the building since I wasn't a member, so instead I peeked around the side to see who was on the patio. Just as I suspected, Stella was sitting at a table, leisurely reading the newspaper and drinking coffee while Henri sat beside her. With all the confidence I could muster, I cleared my throat and called Stella's name. She looked up and smiled when she saw me and waved me over with her newspaper. Henri grinned widely, too, and I caught my breath when I realized it was all for me.

I had to go through the building to get to the patio, so I walked hurriedly past a few patrons, but no one took any notice of me.

"Over here," Henri said when he saw me.

I made my way over to the table, and Henri stood up.

"Good morning," I said to both of them.

"Cute top," Stella said, eyeing the stitching pattern I'd sewn around the shoulders.

"What, this old thing?" I said, only half-joking, and we all laughed.

I composed myself again and asked, "Ready to go?"

"Definitely!" she said.

"She's going through withdrawal," Henri teased, and his sister shot him an annoyed look.

"Great—let's hit the road," I said, eager to get started so that if the shopping trip was going to be a complete failure, we could get it over with already.

"But first," Henri announced, "I want you to meet my parents, Charles and Patricia Livingston."

He gestured to the well-groomed couple sitting at the table behind him, and I froze. I wasn't prepared to meet Henri's parents. I didn't know what to say, or how to stand, or how to shake his mother's hand when I couldn't stop my own hand from shaking. Sure, I liked Henri. In fact, he was quite possibly the most attractive man I'd ever laid eyes on, but this was not the time to meet his parents. Besides, Henri was out of my league, and I wasn't doing myself any favours by investing more time with him. All I was doing was spinning a wider web of lies.

This was all happening way too fast. I began to sweat and thought I might possibly faint.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Odette," Mrs. Livingston said in a velvety voice, as she extended a beautifully manicured hand for me to shake.

I forced myself to walk around the back of Henri's chair to take hold of her hand. Mr. Livingston also extended his hand to greet me, and I mumbled something about how I hoped they were enjoying their stay.

Thankfully, Stella intercepted the pleasantries by insisting we leave already, and I gladly followed her to the door. Mrs. Livingston wished us good luck on our shopping trip to the *big city* and laughed at her own witty remark. I glanced back at Henri and he gave me his dazzling smile. I felt like somehow I'd just passed a test.

As we walked up to the jeep, Stella handed me the keys since I knew my way around better than she did. I gladly accepted. It would offer a nice distraction from obsessing over how the day was going to go. I was a little rusty at the wheel, so I backed out slowly then took my time driving down the main road through town. I got a few curious looks from people, but I just waved them off.

“Wow, you really are a local,” Stella said.

I smiled uncomfortably, but it was true. I knew just about everyone who lived in The Point, and they all knew me.

As we approached the convenience store, I held my breath, worried that Aline might see me and wave through the window as we passed. Or what if Stella asked to stop at the store to buy a bottle of water? I began to overheat and reached down to crank up the air conditioning. The jeep engine revved as I sped past the store, and Stella glanced at me, noticing my strange behavior. Then she turned away and looked out the window again.

A few kilometres later we reached the highway that would take us to Moncton. The drive was easy, and we chatted about music, books, and fashion. Stella was not at all like the friends I grew up with. She had opinions about so many different things, and I had to admit, it was interesting to hear her talk about subjects I knew so little about, like university pranks and New York celebrities she'd met.

We spent the next couple of hours visiting the boutiques I'd chosen for our shopping trip. To my surprise, they weren't that bad. The prices were way too high and the designs absurd, but Stella relished in it. She seemed invigorated by the bold prints and followed the seams of the dresses with her fingers. She tried on all kinds of outfits but in the end only bought a headscarf, a sequined top, and a pair of blue sandals. She seemed pleased with her finds and told me more than once that she was having a good time.

When we finished with the last boutique, I suggested we call it quits and grab lunch. I picked out a small microbrewery just off Main Street with a quaint outdoor café. Stella was apprehensive

at first because the menu looked a little too deep-fried for her diet, until I told her about the blueberry beer brewed on site and how drinking it was an authentic Maritime experience. Then she loved the idea of being able to brag about it to her girlfriends back home.

“You know what, Odette?” she said, smiling deviously at me. “You’re not half bad.”

“Thanks, I guess.”

“What I *mean*,” she clarified,” is that I wasn’t too sure about you when we first met. You’re hard to read. Anyway, if it’s worth anything—I like you. And I think my brother likes you too, although he’s totally playing it cool because he’s used to girls going completely gaga over him.”

I smiled despite myself. “Today was fun for me too, and nice to spend time with a true fashionista.”

Stella was pleased with the compliment and winked at me as she took another drink of blueberry beer.

A few minutes later our meals arrived. As we ate our lunch, I asked Stella to tell me more about Paris. I wanted to hear everything she knew about the city and what she’d done while she was there studying fashion design. Stella was the only person I knew who’d been to the Eiffel Tower, and I hoped that I, too, would get a chance to go there one day. There, and so many other places.

Guilt

Over the next two weeks, Henri and I, along with Sean and Stella, went out sailing together almost every other day. I barely slept, spending my days on the boat and nights at the store. The fatigue was taking its toll, but I didn't care. I loved every exhilarating moment out on the water, and it felt good just to be near Henri. There were plenty of excuses to sit beside him, talk to him about the boat, and have his hand fall onto mine as we secured the rigging together.

The closer I got to Henri, Sean, and Stella, the harder it was to admit to the lies I'd told them. I could never fully let my guard down for fear that I say the wrong thing. Henri would ask me questions about my life and I would twist the answers, always leaving him unsatisfied. I pushed the guilt to the back of my mind and decided to make the most of our last bit of time together, no matter what the cost.

None of this mattered anyways. This *thing* between me and Henri, whatever it was, was not going to last much longer. His vacation was coming to an end, and soon he'd be sailing back home to Bermuda with his family. Once they returned to their busy, privileged lives, I knew I'd never hear from any of them again.

Unfortunately, the unintended consequence of spending so much time with Henri was that I was falling for him. He looked into my eyes so completely, as if trying to decode a puzzle, and it drew me to him like a moth to a porch light. Even his confidence was intoxicating.

Henri shared his world with me—a stark contrast to my

everyday reality. He wasn't limited by the same burdens I carried. He didn't know what it was like to go to the grocery store with a calculator or to have to save enough money over the summer months to fill the trailer's oil tank before winter arrived.

When I was with Henri, I took on his world and left mine at home. I had no worries—I was free. The awakening inside my chest fed off Henri and grew bigger with each new experience he gave me.

Still, I refused to think of him as my boyfriend. Letting myself believe that he actually liked me was a slippery slope. I was much too practical to believe I had a real chance with him—the divide between our two worlds was just too wide. All I had to do was stick to the plan initiated by Anne: enjoy a guilt-free summer fling to end my two-year drought.

During one of our afternoons together on the boat, Henri invited me to a barbeque with Stella and Sean at his cottage on The Bluff. When I told Anne about it, she almost squeezed my arm off and made me promise to take her with me. She loved my double life and treated it as her own personal soap opera. This invitation to Henri's cottage was her chance to play a role alongside the lead character.

Henri offered to pick us up, but I suggested that Anne and I meet him at the club instead. He shrugged it off, seemingly oblivious to my diversion, saying he was going to be working on the boat anyway and would just wait around until we showed up.

Anne came over to my place to wake me up after my night shift, but I was so groggy she had to pounce on me just to get me out of bed. I finally made it to the shower while she went to the kitchen to make me coffee and toast.

I sat on the bed in my robe, hair wrapped in a towel, sipping coffee but wishing I could just inject the caffeine. Meanwhile, Anne sifted through each item in my closet to pick out a perfect outfit for me. She was *way* over-thinking things and wanted me

to wear a skirt, but I reminded her that we were going to a cottage barbeque not dining at La Maison Tait. So we finally agreed on a pair of jean shorts and a summer blouse.

"Tell me, what's really going on with you and Henri? And how come every time I call you're never home? I haven't seen you in *forever*." She sulked. "Are you love-drugged by this guy or what?"

"I am *not* in love with Henri," I said defensively as I dressed in front of the mirror.

"Yah, right."

"*Écoute*, it's true I like him. He's actually a really nice guy—"

"Despite being a yachtie?"

"Yes, despite that. But he's leaving soon to go back to Bermuda. So my plan is to stick to the plan—have fun while he's here, and then when he leaves, it's over. End of story. No regrets, no apologies, no one gets hurt."

"That's it? That's all you're gonna give me? Seriously, Odette, I need *way* more details than that. His hair—those eyes! Tell me what it's like to be with him? Tell me, I need to know," she said, bursting with curiosity and flopping back on the bed to kick her feet in the air like riding a bicycle.

"Enough, already!" I said and sat down on the chair facing her.

She looked up, grinning, and arranged herself cross-legged on the bed, then cupped her chin in her hands like a child receiving a bedtime story.

"Henri is like a wonderful apparition—someone exciting to have around yet not quite real enough to grasp in your hands. He looks good, smells good, always says just the right thing—and he's funny, too."

Anne smiled dreamily.

"To be honest, I don't know why he's so interested in me. The more I hold back from him, the more he wants to be with me. It's stupid that I ever lied to him in the first place. I can see that now. And if I could take it all back, I would. But it's gone too far..."

I trailed off, letting the words hang in the air until Anne spoke

abruptly. "Wait a minute. What do you mean by *holding back*? Are you saying that the most you've ever done with Mr. Handsome is hold his goddamned hand?"

She waited for my response, and when she read it on my face, she yelled out her disappointment. "You're pathetic! Being his *friend* was not part of the assignment. Henri's supposed to help you break your two years in the Sahara. You need to get up on there and ride that camel!"

I rolled my eyes and looked up at the ceiling.

"I can't help it. I just feel so guilty, pretending to be something I'm not. Plus, we've never actually been alone. There's always someone with us when we go sailing, and it's not like I'll be inviting him back to the trailer any time soon. Plus, I've been so busy with work every day that I always have to run off before we can make time to be together."

"Listen to me, Odette. First things first—you have *nothing* to feel guilty about. You don't have to disclose your life story to this guy—you're not marrying him, for Christ's sake. Secondly, time is running out. He'll be gone soon, and you'll be kicking yourself for not seeing what he's made of. I haven't yet met a man who'd say no to being seduced by a beautiful woman. Do you hear what I'm saying? You can't just hang out in your bedroom all day reading novels about people getting it on. You gotta get out there!"

Anne was right, but I didn't want to hear it. If she wasn't my best friend, I would have thrown something at her head to make her stop talking. At the rate things were going, I'd be lucky to get a handshake from Henri by the time he left town. If I wanted more, I'd have to find a way to be alone with him and send out the signals.

"Fine. I'll do it," I said sharply.

"Hallelujah!" Anne yelled as she flopped back on the bed.

Then she looked over at the alarm clock and said, "Shit, let's go—we're gonna be late!"

We arrived at the club just as Henri was walking up to the jeep. Anne gave my arm a squeeze, and I knew exactly what she was thinking: his smile could knock you over with just one look.

"Hi, Henri," I said as we walked up to him.

"Good day, ladies. Anne, it's a pleasure to see you again."

"Nice to see you, too, in the flesh, instead of just hearing about it all day from Odette," she said, and I jabbed her with my elbow.

"Where's the rest of the gang?" I asked.

"They're at the cottage already. Stella didn't feel like going to the beach today. She prefers the pool."

Anne glanced over at me and mouthed the word *pool*, and I could only imagine where Henri was about to take us. We got into the jeep and started driving toward The Bluff. Then it occurred to me that I wasn't at all familiar with the area. I'd never really had a reason to visit this part of town before, even though it was only a few kilometres from where I grew up.

As we drove farther into the neighbourhood, the cottages grew grander and the land lots bigger and more private. These homes were nothing like where I lived. From my living room window, I could look out and see the television show that my neighbor was watching across the street in his living room.

"Not much farther now," Henri said. "We're the last cottage on the right."

Up ahead was a narrow tree-lined drive leading toward the water. We rounded the bend and drove up a paved lane that opened up to an incredible property. I tried to hide my reaction, sure my wide eyes would give me away if Henri so much as looked over at me. I could only imagine what Anne was thinking in the back seat.

The cottage was spectacular—all three stories of it. It had more windows than walls, and balconies jutted out from every room in the house. There was a three-car garage and an enormously grand front entrance. The yard had lush groupings of white flowers mixed with leafy shrubs, and the ocean framed the view on either side of the house.

"You have a very nice place, Henri," I said matter-of-factly.

He nodded and said something about his mother having expensive taste. Then he grabbed a bag from the car and motioned for us to follow him inside.

"Holy shit," Anne whispered as she looped her arm in mine and we walked into the house together.

Inside, the home was even more impressive. It had an open-concept kitchen, living room, and formal dining room with a wall of glass along the back of the house overlooking an infinity pool and the ocean beyond it. We could see Stella outside on a patio lounge, reading a magazine and looking like a 1950s pin-up girl in her red bathing suit and cropped, black hair.

We heard footsteps coming down the stairs, and Sean appeared in the kitchen with us.

"Welcome, ladies. So nice to see you both again," he said, kissing each of our hands. "I hear we're in for a real treat today. Henri's offered to seduce us with a fine cut of meat for dinner."

"That's *exactly* what we're hoping for," Anne said, without missing a breath.

Sean gave her a coy smile. "But first...cocktails!"

He went over to the cabinet in the dining room and pulled out two martini glasses. "What shall it be, ladies?"

I didn't exactly know what went into a martini, but I was pretty sure I wouldn't like it. I nervously glanced at Anne. She made a sour face, and I didn't know what to say until I noticed a green martini on the patio table next to Stella.

"We'll have what she's having," I blurted out.

"Appletinis! Great choice," Sean said and proceeded to gather the ingredients to mix the drinks.

"I hope you're hungry, ladies," Henri said as he laid out the food on the counter.

I stared at the massive steaks, the blue-ribboned cheese, and the odd-looking mushrooms. I couldn't think of anything to say, so I just nodded. Then Sean finished mixing our drinks and handed them to us. Anne and I looked at the green concoction and

cautiously took a sip.

"Why don't you two go relax by the pool with Stella," Henri offered. "We'll be out in a few minutes when we're ready. Please make yourselves at home."

"Thank you, we will," I said, still a bit stunned by the grandeur of the house, the food, and the martinis.

Anne and I walked outside to a sanctuary of water and flowers. The pool had an infinity edge that disappeared into the horizon of the beach. At the corner of the lot, a waterfall trickled over a rock garden and into a pond filled with slippery orange fish. Attached to the back of the house was a pergola laced with vines running overtop a fully-equipped outdoor kitchen with a wood oven and a large, stainless steel barbeque.

Stella lounged comfortably by the pool in the partial shade of a big umbrella.

"Hi, Stella," I said as we walked up to her.

"Odette! Lovely to see you," she said warmly.

The three of us sat around the pool, sipping martinis and tanning our legs in the hot sun. Stella recounted an article she'd just read about the increasing popularity of faux-fur. Anne and I nodded and kept drinking.

Soon, Henri and Sean appeared with beers in hand and a tray of meat for the barbeque. Sean offered to make us another drink, which I declined because of my nervous heartburn, but Anne happily accepted. She seemed to be reveling in the attention, and I suspected that in her mind, she was playing the role of a rich patron on vacation and Sean was the pool boy.

We enjoyed an abundant meal together, laughing and joking around. But the day passed quickly, and it was time to make my escape if I was going to get to work on time. Just the thought of another night at the store left me deflated, but I tried my hardest not to think about it. I was having such a good time with Henri, and I didn't want to waste a minute of it.

By the time Anne finished her sixth appletini, I knew it was time to leave. I dreaded with each passing minute that she would

blurt out a comment that would blow my cover and make everyone judge us as liars. But just as I was getting her to her feet, she insisted on showing everyone her party trick. She could tie knots into ten cherry stems in ten minutes using only her tongue.

Stella had never heard of such a thing and thought it was absolutely wonderful. Sean made me promise to stay until Anne had proven her talent, and he ran into the house to grab a bowl of cherries. I wanted to crawl out of my skin, but there was little I could do to stop the show. Once Anne put her mind to something, there was no stopping her.

Henri noticed my uneasiness and offered to take me on a tour of the house. I hesitated to leave Anne unattended, but then realized that this might be my only chance to get Henri alone for a few minutes to show him I was interested, just like Anne had coached me. Plus, there was no way Anne would ever let me forget it if I didn't at least try.

Henri led me into the living room to a shelf with family photos. "That's me at the wheel of my grandfather's sailboat," he said, pointing to a smaller version of himself wearing a captain's hat, seated on the knee of a distinguished-looking gentleman.

"You were so cute," I cooed at him.

"And what do you think of me now?"

"Some things never change," I said flirtatiously.

He smiled and took my hand. "Let's go upstairs for a view from the top balcony."

We did a quick tour of the second floor which consisted of six bedrooms, each with a bathroom and walk-in closet. I'd never seen a home this big before and couldn't imagine how anyone would ever need so much space. The rooms were impeccably decorated but lacked a lived-in quality. So far, the only personal touches I'd seen were the photos on the mantel downstairs.

We arrived at the end of the hallway, where a narrow staircase led to the third-floor loft. I hesitated at the bottom step.

"Trust me," he said, urging me on. "It's the best view in town."

I took a deep breath and climbed the stairs, encouraging my-

self to be cool and confident with each step.

Henri slid open the door to the balcony, and we walked over to the railing and looked out at the panoramic view. There were sailboats on the horizon, taking in the last bit of sunlight. A flock of black cormorants crowded together on an isolated sandbar, lifting their wings to cool down from the heat of the day. The evening breeze blew in from the water and lifted my hair off my shoulders.

"Am I right or am I right?" Henri said as he held his hands out to acknowledge the view.

"You're right. It's amazing," I conceded.

Henri moved in close. I could feel the heat of his body against my arm. It was time to make my move. I turned and looked up at him like I might kiss him, the seconds passing between us like a heavy pendulum. He stood so close to me, so willing. Then suddenly I broke his stare and lowered my eyes in intimidation, too nervous to make a move. What was wrong with me? Why did I idolize him so? I shook my head and looked away, cursing myself.

Henri took a step back and stared at me so deeply that I almost stepped forward just to be near him again.

"Odette, I don't understand?"

Of course he didn't. How could he when this whole image I'd created of myself was a lie.

He sighed, and I could tell he was searching for words. He'd probably pieced together enough of the puzzle to call me out as a fraud.

"Odette?"

"Yes," I said, looking up at him.

"How about you and I go on a proper date?"

"What?"

"A date. Just you and me. Two people alone over dinner, getting to know each other. That's normally how it works."

I just stared at him. Then he looked offended, like I might say no to him.

"Yes—yes!" I blurted out.

"Excellent," he said, relieved. "How about the regatta on Mon-

day? We could watch a few races from the wharf then dine at the restaurant afterwards?"

"Perfect. It's a date."

Henri looked pleased and held out his hand for us to shake on it. As I extended my hand, he pulled me toward him and used his other hand to brush the hair out of my eyes. He held me close, his breath on my cheek. The cool breeze lifted the hair off my neck and sent goosebumps down my arm. Henri traced his fingers across my wrist and up my forearm, offering warmth and protection. Then before I could pull away, he sealed the promise of our date with a kiss.

"Whoaaa!" yelled Anne from poolside below, and I pulled away from Henri. We both looked over the railing to see Anne finishing her party trick in front of Stella and Sean. It was *definitely* time to go home. And for some reason, I felt relieved.

Henri and I joined the others back at the pool just as Stella and Sean erupted in screams of delight. Anne pulled the last knotted cherry stem from her mouth and placed it beside nine others on the table.

"Brilliant!" Sean said, leaning back in his chair, thoroughly amused.

"Time to go," I said, helping Anne out of her seat.

"Right," she said. "Gotta get you off to work."

Oh no. Things had been going so well up until now, but just as I'd feared, Anne was blowing my cover. I tried to think of something to say, but Henri spoke first.

"Can't you stay? It's kind of late to be going to work, isn't it?"

"Oh, it's not that big a deal, really," I answered quickly, searching for a plausible excuse. "It's just easier to do inventory after-hours when the store's closed."

"*Au revoir, les filles,*" Stella yelled with a drunken wave. "It's been swell."

Anne and I made our way to the kitchen while Henri hung back to talk to Sean by the pool. Anne made it as far as the stool before insisting on a short rest because her head was spinning.

She leaned her face in her hands and slurred a question at me that I didn't quite catch. I told her to breathe through her nose while I went to the sink to pour her a glass of water.

Through the kitchen window, I saw Sean and Henri talking by the pool. The patio door was still open, and I easily picked up on their conversation.

"Well played, my friend," Sean said, waving a cigar in the air.

"What do you mean?" Henri asked.

"I saw you sneak upstairs with Odette. You weren't gone that long, but then again...long enough. I was starting to think you'd gone soft."

"Stop," Henri said, visibly irritated.

"What?" Sean said innocently through a cloud of exhaled smoke, as he passed a cigar to Henri.

"I'm just saying...there must be a reason you're spending so much time with her. Normally you tire of a woman after only a few days. But of course, that's because they always give you what you want so easily."

"Stop it," Henri said more forcibly this time, as he struck a match to light the cigar.

Sean narrowed his eyes like he was thinking. "That's it! You haven't been able to shag her yet. Ha! I dare say you're losing your charm. Perhaps these local girls are immune to you. Well, at least you picked a half-decent one to have a go at. That's more than I can say about her friend, Anne. My God, she's crass."

Henri lifted his hand like he might strike Sean in the face, but instead threw his cigar in the pool.

I looked back to Anne, who was leaning on the counter.

"Come on, Anne, time to go," I said and helped her to her feet.

Henri stormed into the kitchen just as Anne and I reached the front entrance. He stopped when he saw us and offered to take Anne's other arm so we could walk her to the jeep.

We drove home in silence, which was fine by all three of us. I had to do some quick thinking anyways about where to get dropped off. Anne wouldn't be capable of doing much walking

in her drunken condition, and I certainly wasn't about to bring Henri to the trailer so Ma could get her paws on him. Then I remembered the MacArthur family stopping in at the store a few days ago and mentioning a road trip. Their house would be perfect—a respectable seaside property only a few streets away from where I lived.

Luckily, when we arrived at the house, there was no car in the driveway, and my nerves settled a bit. Anne and I got out of the jeep, said goodbye to Henri, who was still in a grumpy mood, and walked up the driveway. Henri watched us for a few moments until I waved for him to go, and he finally drove away.

“I had the best, best time!” Anne said in a much too loud voice, as she struggled to walk in a straight line beside me.

Then she looked around and said, “Where the *hell* are we?”

*B*ing bong.

The store's air conditioning felt like a cool cloth on my warm cheeks still tinged from an afternoon spent poolside with Anne and Stella.

"*Bonjour, la petite,*" Aline sang when she saw me walk in.

I went over to her and placed my head on her shoulder. She folded the newspaper she'd been reading and patted my rosy cheeks.

"Can I have a little nap here before we get started?" I asked.

"*Pauvre toi,*" she said in her motherly way. "You must rest or else you will get sick."

"Or I could just drink an extra-large coffee," I said, turning my attention to the coffee counter and pouring myself a cup. "Tell me, how's the visit with the in-laws going?"

"Very good, thank you. We spent four days sightseeing."

"Are Reem's parents having a good time? Do they like Canada?"

"Yes, of course, but Shediach is very small. They expected much bigger city. Still, they are amazed at how much space everyone has and how homes have big yards with trees."

"Really? Of all the cultural differences, they notice that?" I asked, thinking it funny that something so basic would intrigue these visitors. "It must be crowded in Beirut?"

"Yes, yes. Many people live in family apartments. Buildings are much different there—made from concrete, not wood."

“How’s your mother getting along with Reem’s mother? Is it like a big reunion?”

“Not exactly,” she said, frowning. “There is tension in a house with too many mothers. Sometimes I make excuse to go outside and empty recycling. I take Alexandrine with me, and we walk around to get away from noise.”

“Oh no, that sounds bad,” I sympathized.

“Yes, but this is family, you know. It is most important thing in life.”

“You’re right,” I said, thinking of my own unconventional family.

“We also visited many shops downtown. It was so humid that we had to keep going inside for air-conditioning. Reem’s parents were very pleased that people spoke French, but they had some trouble with accents. I told them it would be fine—speak slowly—but...”

“But what?”

She hesitated, then said, “You see, Reem’s mother wears hijab head scarf.”

“Oh.”

“It is fine to be curious about another culture. This is normal. People are polite but some stare—very uncertain...”

I looked down at the front page of the newspaper lying on the counter. The headline stories featured images of riots in the Middle East and bearded Muslim leaders with captions reading: FAILED PEACE TALKS...SUICIDE BOMBER TARGETS FOREIGN HOTEL...GIRL SHOT WHILE GOING TO SCHOOL.

I sipped my coffee.

Finally, Aline said, “I have pictures of Reem’s father sitting on giant lobster in front of tourism bureau. Would you like to see?”

“Absolutely,” I said and leaned over the counter to watch the screen of her digital camera.

I left the store, rubbing my tired eyes, partly because it felt good

and partly to see better through the thick fog. I'd planned on going straight home to catch up on my sleep. But now that I was out in the fresh air, I let my legs carry me down familiar lanes until I reached the tall grass bordering the back of the beach. When I climbed to the top of the dune, I stopped dead in my tracks.

The fog was so thick that land, water, and air smudged together into a wall of grey mist. I stood there in the anonymous haze, feeling its cool presence on my tired eyelids, inhaling its rich humidity into my lungs. I found myself sneaking glances behind me for landmarks to ground my surroundings and ward off a feeling of being swallowed up.

Finally, the wind shifted, and the fog parted, unveiling the most unexpected sight. On the beach was a mermaid with long seaweed hair, lying on a massive seashell with her face looking up at the sky. As the fog lifted, more shapes appeared in the sand, and I realized they were all entries in the annual sand sculpture competition. It was an event that I tried to take Sophie to every year, but this time I'd completely forgotten about it because I'd been so busy sailing with Henri.

I walked down the beach, weaving in and out of the mythical creatures like navigating a boat through buoys. I saw a treasure chest filled with oversized gold coins, a castle with a moat and a sand princess in the tower, and a boxy lighthouse decorated with a metal lantern as a beacon, next to a giant smoking lobster in a swordfight with a crowned crab. Ahead of me was an octopus chair decorated with shells, and a pair of hands clasped together in prayer, pointing up to the sky.

I treaded silently through the sand, enjoying my own private art gallery, when I came upon a life-sized sculpture of a lone fisherman in a dory. His head was bowed with arms extended as if working the oars. The mournfulness of the sailor drew me in and triggered memories of Grand-papa. He always said his favourite boat was the dory because he could take it out alone and be his own captain. He told me that's how he knew he had no other choice but to go to sea, and so began my family's lineage of lob-

stermen.

“Odette?” a voice called out to me.

I looked up to the sky, envisioning Grand-papa calling down to me from heaven.

“Odette?” the familiar voice said again, and I saw ahead of me a silhouette standing alone on the beach.

It was Ben.

“It’s me,” I answered.

“Are we in a strange fairy tale?” he said, gesturing to the sand creatures.

“I know, it’s surreal,” I said, walking over to him.

“I haven’t seen you in a while. I was beginning to think you’d left town.”

“Nope, still here. Just been busy,” I confessed.

He looked at me curiously, then said, “You look *really* tired.”

I nodded but hoped he wouldn’t ask me why. I didn’t want to tell him about Henri. Not that he would care, but for now I wanted to keep my Henri and my doryman separate.

“I just finished a shift at the store, and all I could think about all night was constructing a bed out of packages of paper towel, so I could curl up and go to sleep. You know you’ve reached a new low when that happens.”

He laughed, then motioned to the sand, and I gladly sat down beside him. We were flanked on either side by a lobster and an octopus.

“It must be interesting, though. I mean, seeing all kinds of people come and go all night. Everyone must have a story to tell.”

He was right. Some even joked the store should be renamed *Confessionnal* since it was the one sure place to pick up the local gossip around town. You couldn’t help but notice when a husband came into the store with someone else’s wife waiting for him in the passenger seat of his car.

“It’s true. I like chatting with the customers...and my co-workers, too.”

“Then why do you feel the need to come to the beach to un-

wind after work, when you should be going home to bed? What gets you so worked up?"

I stared at him like he was a mind reader. How could someone I'd only known for such a short time peg me so well? And why did I so willingly tell him my life story?

"I know I ought to be grateful for the job, especially since I didn't go to college, but I don't like how my life is already planned out for me. You should hear Ma go on and on about it. She wants me to work as night supervisor for another couple of years until I get promoted to daytime supervisor, and then work my way up to store manager. Oh, and along the way, I'll meet some rich guy, get married, and have kids." I sighed at how contrived it all sounded.

"A steady paycheck isn't such a bad thing, is it?"

"No, it isn't. But I can't help feeling like I'm settling. It seems too easy," I said, feeling a little exasperated.

We sat quietly for a while. I didn't mind the silence, and I could feel the evening's stress slowly work its way out of the tight muscles in my shoulders. I was deliriously tired but not ready to go home just yet.

"Odette?"

"Yes?"

"What do you *really* want out of life? Until you can answer that question, I don't think you'll be happy."

It took only a second for me to answer. "I want to be free."

Ben smiled knowingly, then narrowed his eyes like he was concocting a plan.

"What?" I asked suspiciously.

He looked out at the fog still hanging over the water and glowing from the sun rising behind it. "Let's get started, then," he said and pulled off his shirt.

All of a sudden our talk had elevated to another level, and I didn't know what was happening. Ben sat half-naked beside me, eyeing me expectantly. I saw the detail of the tattoo that covered the inside of his arm all the way down to his wrist. It was water—a mesmerizing tangle of aqua waves outlined in black that swirled

across his skin.

"Take off your shirt," he said.

I didn't dare move.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

"I don't even *know* you," I answered logically.

"But do you trust me, nonetheless?"

"I suppose I do," I said, although I was feeling very strange about the whole thing.

"Good, then take off your shirt. I'll even turn around," he said and slid over so we were back to back.

"What's going on?" I asked with a nervous laugh.

"An act of freedom."

"What kind of freedom requires me to undress?"

"The kind that involves swimming in the ocean."

"Wait a minute—hold on. I swim in the ocean all the time; there's nothing new about that."

"Then you haven't been doing it properly."

I still wasn't buying it.

"Listen, Odette, I've tried a lot of crazy things in different places around the world, and *nothing* feels as liberating as swimming naked at sunrise."

I turned to see his face, to see if he was joking, but he was completely serious.

"I don't think you *understand*," I clarified for him. "I don't get naked in front of men."

"There's no time like the present."

I could hardly believe we were having this conversation. The whole morning had been bizarre, from the eerie fog to the sculptures and now this. Then I thought of Anne and what she would tell me to do right now if she were here. She'd absolutely, without a doubt, say *shut up and take off your clothes*.

"Well, what's it gonna be?" he asked, like it really didn't matter to him either way.

I took a deep breath and said, "Promise not to look?"

I could feel Ben grinning behind me as he said, "Um—well..."

I jabbed him in the ribs with my elbow, and he muffled a laugh.

"I promise, I promise," he assured me.

Then, in an uncharacteristic act of bravery, I pulled my shirt over my head, folded it neatly, and placed it on the sand beside me.

"Great, now the pants," he said.

He pulled off his shorts and threw them to the side with his shirt. Then, as if on cue, Snow shot out from the dune grass and made a nest for herself in the pile of still-warm clothes.

"Oh, God," I said aloud, having meant to only say it in my head.

"Stop worrying, Odette. Don't think—just do."

"That's easy for you to say. You go swimming naked all the time."

But as soon as I said the words, I wanted to take them back. I'd just admitted to spying on him all those mornings on the beach when he thought he was alone.

"Wait, let me explain..." I said.

"Relax, it's fine," he said, and I heard a chuckle.

"What's so funny?"

"Odette, I knew you were there the whole time."

I could feel my cheeks burning, and I wanted to disappear. "If you knew I was there, why didn't you say something to me?" I asked, mortified.

"You looked like you were enjoying yourself, and I didn't want to disturb the show."

I closed my eyes and wanted to die from the embarrassment. Then Snow meowed, and I looked over to see her still sitting on the pile of clothes.

"Payback time," he said.

I felt like a pathetic prude, embarrassed at even the notion of a naked man in my presence. How was I ever going to feel freedom if I couldn't even be free with my own body?

It was my decision to make, and no one could tell me what I

was supposed to do. If I wanted to take off the rest of my clothes, then I would do it.

The fog was quickly dissipating, and behind it the sun was breaking on the horizon in plumes of orange. Soon the beach would be awake, the spell broken, and we'd be interrupted by early morning dog walkers. I studied the sand sculpture of the forlorn doryman in his boat and knew, all the way through to my bones, that I didn't want to be like him. I couldn't continue my small existence in this small town when there was so much of the world left to see.

I needed more.

I unzipped my pants and threw them to the side, then hastily removed my bra and underwear before I could change my mind.

I sat naked on the beach.

I leaned backward until I felt the warmth of Ben's back and lay against him for strength.

"It's time to go," he said.

With a *ready, set, go*, Ben held my hand as we ran to the water and dove in. It was dark and cold, but up ahead the sun reached out its warmth to us. And then, the fear released its grip on me, and I swam weightless underwater.

Part III: September

welfare *n.*

1 well-being, happiness

2 aid in the form of money or necessities for those in need

Regatta

I was excited to watch the regatta but at the same time nervous about my date with Henri. I liked spending time with him, except I could never completely let my guard down. He was always trying to figure me out. He had a clever habit of asking the same question in different ways to elicit more information from me. Once I almost told him about Ma's bingo career before I stopped myself just in time by cupping my hand over my mouth and pretending to yawn.

It was simply easier to keep things vague rather than reveal the awkward truth. The summer was passing by so quickly. Soon Henri would be gone, and I didn't want to ruin the little time we had left together.

I walked along the side of the road past the long queue of cars inching their way to the regatta. I kept an eye out for Henri and eventually found him standing beside his jeep at the far end of the wharf. It was clearly the best spot to watch the race because of the open view of the finish line.

As I walked up to Henri, he must have sensed me there because he turned and reached out to me. I took his hand in mine because it was, after all, a real date.

"You know, there's still a part of me that thinks you won't show when we plan to go out together," he said.

"You can trust me," I said, then suddenly felt terribly guilty and confused.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Yes, everything's fine."

When I looked back into his eyes, I saw how easily I could hurt him, and I knew the time had come to stop lying to him. Anne would tell me to carry on with this summer charade, but this wasn't me—I was *not* a liar. I vowed to explain everything to Henri at dinner tonight. As for right now, I wanted to spend one last, perfect day together.

A horn sounded from the top of the lighthouse, where two race officials stood at attention with clipboards and flags. It was the five-minute warning to race time. On the side of the building was a whiteboard, where someone had scribbled the day's forecast: 20 km SW winds...temp 29...max 30 cm waves.

Out on the water the boats glided effortlessly past each other, their sails carving out the horizon like shark fins. The crews made last-minute adjustments to the lines and called out friendly wagers to each other across the water.

The official in the lighthouse waved a flag and sounded the horn again, signalling four minutes to race time.

I had so many questions about the race, but I held back, thinking Henri would find it strange if I didn't know what was going on. But I soon realized it was going to be a long day of pretending if I didn't tell one more little lie.

"You know, of all the times I've been out sailing with my father, he's never once taken me racing," I said casually.

Henri took the bait. He appeared genuinely pleased to be able to give me the play-by-play. He pointed out the different buoy markers along the racecourse and explained how the sailboats would leave the starting line in a crisscross pattern toward the windward mark on the opposite end. Once the boats reached that first marker they'd head in a straight line, called the reach, to the jibe mark on the far left, all the while trying to capture as much wind as possible. They'd round that marker and head back to the starting line only to crisscross once again toward the windward mark at the far end. This would be the final run then the sailboats would double back on a downwind leg and sail like mad to the finish line.

A long horn sounded from the tower. One minute to race time.

I nervously tapped my foot, waiting for the race to begin. I'd read in the morning newspaper that the boats were mainly Olympic 49ers—a smaller class of racing yacht with a two-person crew. Twenty-seven boats were registered to race today from New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Maine, and Rhode Island.

"It's a fairly typical Olympic course, but today's wind conditions are going to be spectacular. Just look at what's happening out there," he said, pointing to the water.

In the distance, I saw the changing weather. The wind rippled the water's surface as it crept closer to where the boats lay in wait. Sails sat limp overhead as every crew member trained his eye on the water, watching the approaching wind, hands ready on the ropes.

Suddenly, the last horn sounded, and the race was on, just as the wind took hold and tightened the sails like the skin on a drum. The boats lurched forward, cutting through the water as they raced toward the windward mark. From where we stood, it seemed like they were all headed for a collision. The crowd gasped as the racers rounded the marker, but they all made a clean turn.

"My bet is on Swiss Army," Henri said, referring to an aggressive boat in the lead with a red-and-white sail that vaguely resembled the Swiss flag.

It sounded like a fun game to play, so I searched the competition for a boat I could bet on. I found the perfect one, rapidly advancing in the pack with a prominent blue arrowhead on the sail.

"I'm rooting for Arrow," I said, pointing to my pick.

"Let the race begin," Henri said with a smile.

All the boats rounded the next marker, but the distance grew between them with the more skilled crews taking the lead. Ocean spray swept over the decks, and those with a free hand reached up to wipe the salt from their sunglasses. The sun glinted off the water like wrinkled tin foil.

Swiss Army and Arrow were the clear frontrunners while the rest fell behind. I cheered for my boat while Henri warned me not to get too ahead of myself because Swiss Army was clearly going to win.

The intensity of the race grew as the boats rounded the next marker. The crews leaned perilously over the sides of the boats, using their bodies as counterweight for the wind-fuelled sails.

"These guys are working on pure adrenaline—it's speed versus tactic," Henri said.

Our boats still held first and second position as they rounded the last marker. Then in perfect unison, the weathervanes at the tip of their mainsails spun all the way around.

"Now watch this," Henri said excitedly.

All of a sudden a rainbow of colors exploded from the racers in a synchronized release of the spinnaker sails—a technique, Henri explained, to harness the wind for top speed in the final leg of the race. The painted sails decorated the boats like Mexican tablecloths blowing in the wind and making the crowd go wild, cheering and whistling as the boats raced toward the finish line.

In the last few seconds of the race, Arrow made its move. It overtook Swiss Army by stealing its wind and causing its sail to go slack. It lasted only a moment, but it was enough to give Arrow the advantage to cross the finish line ahead by a quarter boat length.

"I won!" I said, jumping up and down.

Henri balled his fists and covered his eyes. "Unbelievable," he said. "I thought Swiss Army had it for sure."

I did a victory dance while Henri shook his head. Then he laughed because I was making such a big show about winning, and he reached for me to hug me close.

We stayed to watch a few more races and continued our game of predicting the winners. In the end, I won two out of three and took full advantage to brag about it while Henri sulked over his losses.

By now it was late in the day, and the races were almost

finished, so we decided to make our way through the crowd to the Sandbar restaurant on the other side of the wharf. Henri had made reservations for our dinner date, complete with a view of the sun setting behind Shediac Island. A perfect way to end a perfect day.

I had to admit I was having a wonderful time with Henri, and not just today but every day we spent together. Being a part of his life and sharing his enthusiasm for sailing had shown me a whole other world—one that awed and inspired me.

There remained, however, one complication. I was, undeniably, falling in love with him.

I caught myself daydreaming about what it would be like to be his girlfriend. I imagined him meeting Ma and Sophie for the first time, and the four of us sitting around the kitchen table, drinking beer and eating spaghetti. Or better yet, we'd all stand on the front lawn with a flamethrower and celebrate as we torched the trailer, then we'd move into a house on The Bluff where we'd never have to worry about another cold winter.

I realized it was Henri's strong nature that infatuated me. No doubt his confidence was a learned behaviour from his parents and their privileged life. Money had a way of freeing the mind from distraction and worry over the everyday. But for the rest of us, budgeting was a constant preoccupation. We learned how to creatively juggle the finances in order to fill up the car with gas and pay the phone bill all in the same week. Money worries were something I imagined I would never be without. It clung to me like a northern shadow.

We entered the restaurant, and the hostess showed us to our table. I recognized her as my neighbour, Marie, who lived a few trailers down from me.

"*Allô, Odette, ça va?*" she said, taking a good look at Henri and then back at me.

"Hi, Marie," I said, lowering my eyes so as not to invite any unwanted interrogation.

"Day off?" she asked, still staring at Henri.

“Yup.”

Henri was oblivious to the exchange and interjected by asking about the wine list. Marie handed over the book and stared into Henri's eyes as he placed his order. I wanted to interrupt and say that I'd much prefer a beer, but I didn't want to draw any more attention to myself so I let it go. Marie left the table, stealing one more glance back at Henri.

“I hope you're hungry,” he said, “because I'm going to take my time with you. We'll start with an appetizer, then add a salad, followed by an entrée, and finally end with dessert and perhaps some port, if you're so inclined?”

I smiled nervously at him, but at the same time I couldn't help feeling flattered that he wanted to spend so much time with me.

Our attention drifted to a graceful sailboat gliding by only a few metres from the end of the wharf. When I turned back to Henri, he was staring at me. It made me nervous all over again, and I blurted out the first question.

“Tell me about Bermuda?”

He considered the question for a moment, then said, “It's rather nice. My mother's side of the family is Bermudian, so that's why we live there. Otherwise, it's next to impossible for foreigners to buy property on the island. I'll admit, it was a great place to grow up. But then again, you must feel the same way about your hometown and being so close to the ocean.”

“Yes, it's nice here, too...in the summer. The winter is something else entirely. The storms can get so bad that the waves crash over the wharf, laying a sheet of ice over everything. One time, the water was so high it pushed the ice cream stand all the way down the road to old Madame Landry's front porch.”

“Your winter sounds dreadful.” Henri laughed. “A good time for a vacation, then.”

His comment struck me in the most unexpected way. In that moment, I realized I'd never been on vacation before. The farthest I'd ever travelled was to Saint John with Anne and her family to visit her first cousins. It wasn't that I didn't want a vacation, be-

cause I actually thought about travelling to other countries all the time. Plus, I'd been saving money in my secret bank account, for which the primary purpose was to build up an escape-from-the-trailer fund. The only explanation I had was that it never seemed like the right time to go anywhere, so I never did.

Henri sat quietly looking at me. His calm demeanor was making me edgy again, so I blurted out another question. "Tell me about the type of work you do?"

He raised an eyebrow as if to object but then took a drink of wine and cleared his throat.

"Well, let's see," he said. "I manage investment portfolios at my father's company. CLS Funds, you may be interested to know, stands for *Charles Livingston & Son*. So as you can imagine, I didn't have much say in the whole matter. As soon as I graduated with my masters in economics, I started working for my father, and the rest is history."

Henri downed his remaining wine and looked agitated. I stared at him as his finger circled the rim of the glass. He was usually so well poised, but he'd just given me a glimpse of what might be the only chink in his armour—he was unfulfilled. He followed a career that had been planned out for him by someone else. Like me, he'd chosen the path of least resistance. I wondered if he had dreams of working somewhere else, or even leaving Bermuda some day. Maybe he had a secret bank account, too?

"What types of portfolios do you manage?" I asked, having no idea what a portfolio was.

"I watch commodities, natural resources, and oil. I also keep an eye on gold," he answered flatly, getting bored of the subject.

Then his mood shifted, and he said, "Now you. Tell me about where you work."

The tide had turned. It was my turn to talk, but I wasn't ready to reveal the entire truth just yet. I wanted more than anything to come clean, but it was happening too fast, and I hadn't found the time to rehearse what I wanted to say. If it came out the wrong way, Henri could walk out on me in the middle of our date, and I

didn't want to be left sitting at the restaurant alone and rejected.

Thankfully, the waitress arrived with another bottle of wine, and I was more than relieved by her timing. I didn't even care about the burn of the drink as I took another gulp. We ordered our meal, Henri making sure to tell the waitress to take her time bringing out each course.

Henri urged me to continue where I'd left off. I let the words stumble out of my mouth, not exactly sure where they were going to go. "I work in retail."

"Yes, I'm aware of that," he said, unsatisfied.

"I'm a supervisor in a shop downtown. I make sure the store is running smoothly and watch the inventory levels."

"What do you sell?"

It was an obvious question, but I had no idea how to answer it. I couldn't very well tell him I worked at a convenience store where I wore a green apron and stocked the shelves with cigarettes and dog food.

"We sell the essentials of course—you know—what every man, woman, and pet needs when they go out on the town."

Henri seemed confused as if I'd just given him a riddle. Then he tilted back his head and laughed heartily. "I get it," he said. "You see them all the time in the city. I'm a bit surprised, though. I wouldn't have expected the trend to be that common around here."

"I know, right?" I said, laughing along with him while not at all understanding the joke I'd apparently made.

"You know what I never understood?"

"I can't imagine what that would be."

"How do people convince those little dogs to jump into those purses and be carried around all day? I mean, *really*?"

Henri had somehow deduced that I worked in a boutique that sold Chihuahua tote bags. I had no idea how he'd inferred that from what I'd said, but it further demonstrated how we lived in two very different worlds.

"You'd be surprised what a dog will do if you put a little food

in front of him," I answered. It was starting to scare me how good I'd become at deceiving him.

"You know what?" Henri said. "If you don't mind me saying, you don't strike me as the type of girl who needs to have the matching Gucci handbag and shoes. Maybe it's just being in this town that makes me think that way, but you seem much more down to earth than the girls I know from back home—the ones that come from old money."

I looked down at what I was wearing, and he was right—I was a minimalist. I wore a simple sundress with my long hair swept over to one shoulder and only mascara for makeup, leaving my freckles to dominate my face. But this simplicity was my style, and my approach had always been that less is best.

"You're right about one thing," I said. "Money doesn't have time to get old around here, that's for sure."

Henri laughed again and reached for my hand across the table. I seemed to be saying all the right things even though I felt no control over what was coming out of my mouth.

The waitress returned with a plate of raw oysters. Henri and I spent the rest of our time together enjoying platters of fresh seafood and asking each other questions. I mostly gave fragmented answers, which Henri took as an elusive game of cat and mouse. It became an elaborate way of flirting on my part, and he willingly accepted my evasions.

As we finished another bottle of wine and shared a bowl of chocolate mousse, the first hint of sunset spread across the horizon like torchlight. We watched the flush of colours transform day into night.

"I'm leaving soon," Henri said.

"I know," I answered quietly.

"It's still early. Do you want to come back to the boat with me?"

I looked over at him. His eyes were searching, hoping. I agonized over what to do when I suddenly felt the heat of oncoming heartburn. It brought with it a painful reality that shattered the

illusion of our perfect date.

I panicked. I was out of practice. I didn't know how to smoothly accept an invitation that would undoubtedly lead to us being alone and him wanting more from me. Then, for some reason, my thoughts turned to Ben and the story he'd told me about the Black Swan who transformed into another form at sunset to live a double life.

I was suddenly very confused and made a weak excuse about having to leave early to meet Sophie. Henri protested, suggesting we stay and enjoy the view over another glass of wine, or go for a walk along the water. But I couldn't think straight. All I wanted to do was run away.

We left the restaurant, and Henri insisted I get in the jeep. I shouldn't have let him drive—we'd both had too much to drink—but he wasn't in the mood to discuss it. I couldn't tell if he was mad at me or mad that he didn't get his way.

He pulled up to the MacArthur house, and there was an SUV in the driveway. The family had obviously returned home from their vacation—my cover was blown. I leaned my head back on the seat, desperately thinking of what to do next.

"Shit," I said, despite myself.

That's when Henri came in fast for a goodnight kiss. He was on me before I even had time to react. I pulled away, breathless, looking into his eyes—those piercing, blue eyes. Adrenaline coursed through my chest, and I knew I was making a rash decision, but I couldn't stop myself. I reached for him anyway, pulling his hair to bring him closer to me. I kissed him with a hunger—a need to break the pattern to prove I was more than this. More than a lonely girl in a small town who needed to be saved.

I didn't want it to stop, but it was too overwhelming, and I pulled back.

He stared at me with longing in his eyes and red wine on his breath. Then he kissed me again with the fervour of letting go of weeks of waiting, hoping for a time when we could be alone. But our desperate intimacy in that moment left me feeling more

exposed than ever.

I pulled away again and opened the door, stumbling onto the road. I ran up the driveway and passed through the narrow pathway between the houses. I kept running until I reached the back road that led to the trailer park.

I felt crazy. My head was spinning with so many emotions.
What the hell was I doing?

Storm

The entire next day I spent in bed.

Days sailing with Henri and nights working at the store had left me physically and emotionally exhausted. Plus, all that food and wine from last night wasn't helping to clear my head. I tried falling back asleep, but it would only last for an hour or so at a time, then I'd wake and replay events over in my mind.

I could only imagine what Henri was thinking of me now. One minute I was inviting him in, and the next minute shutting him out. There was a sense of urgency to our time together with the summer coming to an end, and it was all moving too fast.

Then I thought of Ben, and I felt very confused about how I'd left things with him. It hardly seemed real to me that we'd sat naked together that morning on the beach. It was unlike me to act so cavalierly, and I couldn't figure out what had possessed me to take off all my clothes. Regardless of it being a truly liberating experience, just as he'd promised it would be, I was still a little embarrassed about it all. One thing was clear, though; Ben had a way of explaining things to me that just made sense.

I bet we'd make good friends if only we had more time together. But the end of the summer marked the beginning of the tourist migration, and soon Ben, Henri, and everyone else would be leaving to return to their real lives.

The thought of not seeing Ben again made me feel uneasy. I still had so many questions to ask him about his life on the boat. It intrigued me that someone could actually live like that, and I

wasn't sure I'd ever meet anyone like him again. I resolved to go down to the beach tomorrow morning and look for him one last time, even if it was just to say goodbye.

When I finally emerged from my day of slumber, I called Anne to come over, and we hung out in the living room, watching television. We sat on either end of the couch with our legs stretched out, eating potato wedges with ketchup and drinking beer. As usual, we had the place to ourselves. Ma was at bingo, and Sophie was out with friends.

Anne talked about her new part-time job at the veterinary clinic in Moncton and her crush on the owner, who was married. I reminded her how great Roger was, and she begrudgingly agreed, but said it was still nice to have the eye candy around.

I complained about feeling tired and looking pasty, and it was Anne's turn to console me. She went to the kitchen to get us more beer, along with a cucumber and a knife. I eyed her skeptically when she returned, but she told me to shut up and lean my head back. Then she carefully cut up the cucumber and placed the slices over my eyes and cheeks, then did the same to herself—her version of an in-house spa treatment. Leave it to Anne to always find a way to help me when I needed it most.

It was getting late, and Anne eventually called Roger to come pick her up. When she left, I moved from the couch to the bed and fell into a deep sleep.

The next morning I woke early to an overcast sky. I pulled on a sweater and jeans and combed my hair into a ponytail. To help wake up, I splashed my face with cold water, then went out to the kitchen to make a cup of instant coffee.

By the time I arrived at the beach to look for Ben, heavy storm clouds were hovering in the sky. I hadn't bothered to check the weather report before leaving, and now I doubted the wisdom of being here at all. A burst of wind blew in off the water, and I hugged myself to keep warm. Then I felt a drop of rain on

my forehead. Another gust of wind pushed me to the side, and I stumbled in the sand, my ponytail whipping my face and stinging my eyes.

I started to turn back when I finally saw Ben down the beach.

"Wait," I yelled as I ran toward him.

Ben looked up, surprised to see me, and Snow paced nervously around the boat.

"Hurry," he said, waving me over. "We have to go now!"

I stepped into the dory, and Ben started rowing us back to his boat. A gale lifted an errant wave over the side of the dory, soaking our feet. Snow leapt into my lap for protection, digging her claws into my skin, and I clenched my teeth at the sharp pain. The rain fell heavily on our backs and battered us from all angles. It was impossible to outrun the storm in our waterlogged dory.

Ben rowed furiously while I hunched over in my seat to keep the rain off my face and to shield Snow. I closed my eyes as we rocked in the waves, trying not to grab the gunnels of the dory.

It felt like a lifetime before Ben finally yelled that we'd arrived, and I lifted my head to see his boat beside us. I held Snow under my arm and climbed up the ladder with Ben right behind me. We sloshed onto the deck, and then Ben ushered me into the pilot-house at the stern of the boat where we could finally be free of the hammering rain.

I stood shivering in my wet clothes. Ben disappeared below deck as the storm raged outside. The waves pitched the boat, and the wind and rain battered the windows. I held on to a chair to steady myself. In the distance, a string of lobster boats returned to the safety of the harbour, conceding a day of fishing lost at the hands of Mother Nature.

Ben returned a minute later with towels, dry clothes, and a bottle of water. "You know, I kind of like how we keep meeting. I mean, with you always taking your clothes off," he said, passing me a robe and towel.

I blushed, but still managed to say, "Yah, well, don't get used to it. Special occasions only."

Ben turned away to tend to Snow, who looked absolutely rabid. He gently towel-dried her wet fur while she purred loudly from the attention. When he stopped, she pawed for more, and he scratched under her chin. Then he placed the towel in a bundle on the floor, and Snow wasted no time jumping on top, kneading it into a warm bed.

Satisfied that he wasn't going to peek, I peeled off my heavy jeans and sweater and hung them over the back of the chair. Then with shivering hands, I pulled his robe over my shoulders and tied it tightly around my waist. It was much too big for me, but I didn't care because it was soft and warm. I turned up the collar around my neck, and it smelled like Ben, catching me off guard.

With his back still to me, Ben pulled off his wet T-shirt and shorts. I looked away but then couldn't help glancing back. He was quick about it—I could tell he wasn't trying to infer anything by his nudity—but he was obviously a man who enjoyed the open air. As he pulled a dry shirt over his head, I saw the detail of the muscles in his back and around his shoulders shaped from his daily rowing routine.

I distracted myself by examining the stacks of marine books and rolled-up maps lining the shelves. It was evident that this pilothouse served as Ben's work studio. On the desk was a jar of pencils of different thicknesses, a plastic protractor, and a series of metal rulers. Taking up the rest of the space was a wide-screen laptop and a pair of speakers.

Ben opened the bottle of water he'd brought up from below and poured it into the electric kettle by the window. He took a tin of herbal tea from the shelf and measured out several spoonfuls into a diffuser.

"So this is your daily routine?" I asked, still looking around the room.

"Pretty much," he answered with a shrug. He turned to me for the first time, seeing me wearing his robe.

"Looks good on you."

"Thanks," I replied with a pageant twirl.

“Hey, what happened to your legs?” he said, kneeling down and opening my robe.

I don’t know why I let him, but I didn’t protest when he exposed my thighs, and I looked down to see what he was talking about.

“Jeez, did Snow do this to you? I’m so sorry,” he said, looking over at Snow, who was purring loudly on her towel bed.

On my legs were a scattering of bloody pinholes and a long scratch where Snow’s nails had dug into me during our frantic dory ride.

“It’s fine, really. I don’t even feel it,” I said, but then immediately began to feel the sting of it now that I knew the cuts were there.

“Sit on this chair, and don’t move,” he said as he opened the first aid kit that hung on the wall.

Ben dabbed several cotton swabs with rubbing alcohol and then leaned down and said, “This might sting a little.”

“Ouch!” I yelled, reaching out for his shoulder to squeeze, then quickly retracted my hand.

“It’s okay,” he said, placing my hand back on his shoulder.

He dabbed alcohol on a few more cuts, then wiped the longer scratch down my leg. I distracted myself by staring at the tattoo on his forearm, tracing the outline of the intricate waves inked into his flesh.

The cuts were stinging from the air hitting the alcohol on my skin, so I closed my eyes until I could feel he was done. When I opened my eyes again, Ben was staring at me, and I could sense a change. Something was different.

“The storm’s over,” he said.

“Right.”

Outside, the rainstorm had passed as suddenly as it had appeared, and the boat settled calmly into the water. The sun poked through the clouds, glistening off the wet deck. Gulls squawked overhead as they took flight to dry their wet wings, and Snow meowed at the door to be let out.

"Thank you," I said, then closed the robe around my legs and slid off the chair.

"You're welcome," Ben replied and went over to the first aid kit to pack away the supplies.

I gathered our wet clothes and hung them over the side of the boat to dry while Ben poured us each a cup of hot tea. We moved our chairs to a sunny spot on the deck to warm up from the storm. I let my hair loose from the ponytail so it could dry in the gentle breeze.

We sat and talked for a long while. Ben described his work in oceanography and his travels by boat throughout the Americas. Sometimes he worked alone, other times he hired crew. He'd already seen so much of the world and was wise to its wonders. I was completely absorbed in his stories and envied his adventurous life.

But despite all the interesting travelling he'd done, he led a relatively simple life. He had few possessions, basically only the contents held within the confines of his boat. He worked when he wanted to work and lived free from the pressures of modern life.

I was fully intrigued. Until now, I'd thought there were only two choices in life: you could be rich and have an easy life, or you could be poor and have a hard life. I knew nothing about this fringe social class to which Ben belonged.

Still, I needed to find out more about him.

"You never told me where you're from?" I asked.

"I grew up in Maine, not far from here, actually."

"Ah, so that would explain the name on your boat—*Maine Voyage*."

"Precisely."

"Are your parents still there? Do you see them often?"

"I stop in every once in a while. My dad's a teacher, and my mother runs a floral shop."

"Sounds nice," I said, picturing Ben growing up in a neat and tidy home on the outskirts of town with two normal, kind parents who loved him.

“Do you have a girlfriend back home?” I asked, not sure why I needed to know, but I just did.

“Nah, not anymore,” he said, then looked down at his feet. “She wasn’t that keen on the pirate way of life. She was more interested in a house with kids and a dog.”

Snow, who had been sunning herself on the railing the whole time, raised her head as if she understood the conversation. We both laughed, and she recovered by licking her paw and then ignoring us.

“Don’t you ever get homesick?”

Ben smiled. “Haven’t you heard that home is where the heart is?”

“I guess,” I said, resting my head on the back of the chair and watching the dispersing clouds overhead. “Tell me a city that you’d really like to go to someday? I’m pretty good with geography, so once you say it, I’ll guess the country, and I bet I’ll get it right.”

“That’s easy—Paris.”

“*Paris*? It’s like *the* number one tourist destination in the world and you haven’t been there yet?”

“Nope.”

“How is that even possible?”

“There’s no ocean in Paris, so I never had a reason to go. But if we’re talking France in general, then, yes, I’ve been to Biarritz and Brest...”

“But why Paris?” I asked out of curiosity.

“They say it’s the City of Love. Doesn’t that make you curious enough to want to go?”

“Yes, to Paris and so many other places,” I said, reminiscing about the travels I’d planned as a kid staring up at my map on the wall. “Do you know where your next job will be?”

“Not sure. I’m working on a research project with a multi-national. Don’t know where the company will want me to start, but I expect a call any day now.”

I looked over at Ben, and he grinned knowingly.

“Don’t worry. I’ll let you know when I know so we can keep

in touch.”

“That would be nice,” I said, smiling happily to myself.

Later that morning, after returning home to a hot shower and flannel pyjamas, I crawled into bed for a much-needed nap. But I was overtired and couldn’t reach a deep sleep. I had a recurring dream that woke me up from the anguish of the storyline. The sequence was always the same: I couldn’t hear my own voice. I had something important to say and wanted desperately for someone to understand me, but it felt like I was inside an aquarium tank, talking with distorted words to bystanders on the other side of the glass.

Then I saw Ben amongst all the faces, and he smiled at me. I didn’t need to open my mouth at all because he understood everything I wanted to say even before I had a chance to say it. I reached out my hand to him, but my fingers rippled the air like a stone thrown on the surface of a pond, and he was gone. When the water cleared, Henri stood in his place.

I awoke to the sound of crows dueling over a shiny bit of string outside my window. I lay in bed until my head cleared, and my thoughts turned to Henri. I’d left things in such a mess between us when I ran from the car that night after our date. It made me mad to think that I’d blown the perfect chance to explain to him why I’d told him so many stories that just weren’t true. How it was only because I was feeling insecure and thought I would never see him again.

Anne would say it was only a summer fling, but I still felt like I owed it to Henri to let him make up his own mind about whether or not he liked me—the *real* me. He thought of me as someone who was mysterious and cultured, when really I was just a confused, minimum-wage clerk trying to find herself. I could not have created a more opposite alter ego.

The sun was setting in the sky when I finally mustered up the mental strength to get ready for work. When I opened my

bedroom door and crossed the hall to the bathroom, I noticed Sophie in her room standing in front of the mirror, applying black eyeliner around her beautiful, blue eyes.

“Plans tonight?” I asked casually.

“*Oui*, André is on his way over to pick me up. Josée’s having a party tonight.”

“Sounds like fun.”

Sophie ignored me.

“Stop by the store if you need anything,” I said, trying not to sound too motherly.

Sophie put down the eyeliner and reached for her lipstick. She appeared much older than her impressionable age of fifteen. A shiver ran down my forearms, but I shrugged it off as a chill.

I vowed to spend more time with her to talk about all the things going on in her life. I wanted to be there for her like a big sister should. Tomorrow I’d make time for her, but as for tonight, I had my own beautification ritual to attend to. And so, I retreated to the bathroom to get ready for work.

Unravelled

I hurried out the front door and down the porch steps to go to work, just as a Honda Civic skidded into the driveway, flinging rocks at my shoes. I glared at the driver through the tinted window, pretending I could see him.

Sophie came out of the trailer dressed up for the party. She ran past me to the car and opened the passenger-side door.

"Hi, André," she said in her kid voice.

"*Sophie, tu m'excites*," he said as she got in the car.

His comment aggravated me, and I wanted Sophie to get out of the car.

"How about a kiss?" he said.

"Sophie," I called out, expecting to see her head pop out of the car.

It was quiet for a few seconds, then I heard her say, "Stop!"

"Sophie," I said again, walking toward the car.

"Sorry, you're just so beautiful I couldn't help it," he said.

"Let's just go to the party," she said flatly.

"Sophie!" I yelled to her, but she shut the door, and the car reversed out of the driveway and sped off down the road.

I stood there in a cloud of road dust, and all I could do was hope that it wasn't too late to save Sophie from our family pattern of making bad decisions with bad boys. Hoping that tomorrow wouldn't be too late for our talk.

Around midnight, Laurent stood at the front counter, finishing a

crossword puzzle, while I walked up and down the aisles, scanning bar codes with the laser gun. When I reached the last aisle, I noticed Laurent staring outside. I followed his gaze to a tall, long-haired figure in the corner of the parking lot, and it took only a second for me to recognize who it was.

Ted stood under a tree, shifting unsteadily from one foot to the other. He lifted a wine bottle to his mouth and drank heavily from it, then jerked his head back like he'd just heard a voice. He mumbled a response into the air even though he was alone. He seemed to be saying *no* over and over again.

I couldn't understand why he was acting so strangely. Why would Ted walk through town like a drunk with an open bottle of wine in his hand? And why would he choose to hang out in the store parking lot, of all places? I had visions of him passing out under the tree and still being there in the morning when my shift was over, and I'd be forced to nudge him awake with my foot.

I watched him rifle through his pocket until he pulled out a match and lit it. He stared at the flame like he was trying to focus on it, then he touched the burning tip to a leaf hanging above him. The new growth only smothered out the flame, and he flung the match with a whip of his hand. Something about his carelessness made me feel uneasy.

Ted tightened the jacket collar around his neck to shield against the night chill. The wind picked up and blew his long hair all around his face like marionette strings. I imagined an evil puppeteer perched in the tree above him, controlling Ted's movements by tugging on strings attached to his wrists and shoulders.

Although Ted annoyed me, I couldn't help but feel sorry for him. I knew he had a lot going on in his life. He'd just been fired from work and likely spent all of his money on booze and drugs. His roommate was probably threatening to throw him out if he didn't come up with the rent, and jobs just weren't that easy to come by around here.

Ted took one last swig from the bottle, then grabbed it by the neck and launched it across the parking lot. The sound of smashed

glass on pavement cut through the sober night air.

I looked over at Laurent. Laurent stared at Ted. Ted turned toward the store and fixed his eyes on Laurent by the cash.

I moved toward the front to stand with Laurent, but he stole a quick glance at me and nodded to the back door. It was a strange thing for him to do, but I took his cue and stepped back into the aisle. Something wasn't right.

Bing bong.

"Ronald!" Ted yelled as he entered the store.

I knelt down to sneak a look through the row of cereal boxes, and I could see Laurent standing steadfast by the cash. My heart thumped in my chest with anticipation.

"Where are you?" Ted yelled again, his eyes wildly searching the store.

Then he grabbed a can of Heinz Tomato Soup from the aisle display and launched it at one of the coolers at the back of the store, shattering the glass door completely. He smiled as the shards smashed to the floor.

I shuddered at the awful sound and tried to stay calm.

Laurent remained composed, but his breathing had changed.

"What do you want?"

"Where's Ronald?"

"Not here—not nights."

"You alone?"

"Yes."

Ted jerked his head around, as if receiving a sudden tug on his marionette strings, and then looked over the top of the aisles. I stayed crouched on the floor where he couldn't see me. Meanwhile, Laurent was losing his composure, and it made me nervous. His finger twitched, and he swallowed like his mouth was dry.

Ted noticed Laurent's shifting temperament. "What the fuck's wrong with you?"

Laurent stared wickedly at Ted, like glaring into the eye of the devil himself. His patience was tenuous.

“Yo, freak show! I’m talking to you,” Ted yelled again.

Then in a striking show of bravado, Ted put his hand inside his jacket pocket and pulled out a six-inch blade. He held it tightly in his hand, staring at it as if seeing it for the first time, or seeing the significance of what he was about to do.

Laurent stared at the knife in disgust. There was a loud snap, and he looked down to see that he’d splintered in half his crossword puzzle pencil. He lifted his long fingers in front of his face and curled his hands into fists, exposing the pink scars on his wrists.

Then, from a place down deep inside his gut, Laurent released a bloodcurdling scream like an animal being skinned alive. He screamed and screamed until the push of it made Ted step backward and fall into the display shelf, sending soup cans tumbling across the floor. Laurent screamed like he was angry, like he needed to hear his own voice to remember he still had one, like he needed to redeem for all the years he’d been silent.

I imagined that Laurent’s altercation with Ted—this fear of being attacked—only brought him back to the terror he’d witnessed in Rwanda.

“You are a *coward!*” Laurent yelled, glaring at Ted still lying on the floor. “Do you even know how to kill a man? Do you know anything about death?”

Ted struggled to right himself from the mess of soup cans, but Laurent kept yelling at him.

“Death is alive! It twitches like hacked bodies left in a pile for dead on the embassy lawn. It moans like a dying woman bleeding in a ditch under the heat of the sun. It smells like rancid blood, the kind that drives the dogs mad at night as they howl from the shadows.”

Ted looked confused, lying on the floor. The soup cans still rolled around his feet.

“Death is a hunter from which there is no escape. It leads you

to hide in the forest with only the hand of God to watch over you. It dares you not to move for days until you give into the hunger madness and return to church to seek asylum, only to be locked inside and burned alive. Only I did not go to church that day. I gave up on God long before I had to make that choice.”

When Laurent finally stopped screaming, he had to gasp for air to refill his lungs. Tiny blood capillaries in his eyes had burst from the strain. His fists shook as he held them out in front of his face.

Ted finally got up and lunged forward with the knife. But in the most unexpected show of force, Laurent turned toward the cash register, lifted the metal box up over his head, and launched it across the counter. I watched in horror as Ted crumpled to the ground under the weight of the machine.

At that moment, amongst the madness, it all made sense. Ted’s strange behaviour over the past few months, the drugs in the bathroom, the emptiness in his eyes, the uneasiness he evoked in people. He really was crazy. And although Laurent seemed to have also come unhinged, I knew he was only trying to protect us both.

I felt overloaded with adrenaline and knew I had to move fast. Ted still didn’t know I was in the store, and I needed to call the police before he found me. I crawled to the end of the aisle, then ran through the back door to the phone on the wall.

“This is 911. What is your emergency?”

“Please—hurry!”

Footsteps sounded behind me, and I turned to see Ted at the door. A soup can struck him from behind, hitting him in the lower back. He winced in pain but kept moving. Even though I stood right in front of him, he didn’t see me. It was as if he was hallucinating.

“*Christ*,” he said, rubbing his side.

He limped over to the shipping and receiving dock, and his shoulder hung in dislocation. He pressed the red button on the wall and waited for the heavy door to lift.

Then he saw me standing by the phone.

I was ready to fight, holding a metal stool in front of me with the legs pointed out. I thought I could pin Ted under it and call out for Laurent to help me hold him down until the cops arrived.

Ted and I stood together in a deadlock. He waited for the mechanical door to lift, glaring at me with eyes driven by some unnatural force. I stood frozen in place for an impossible amount of time, as the metal on metal grated above me. Then as soon as the door opened wide enough for him to get out, he disappeared from sight.

"Police!" I heard someone call out from the front of the store.

"That way!" Laurent yelled.

Moments later two cops hustled into the back room, where I stood like a statue. One of them ran over to the shipping door and jumped off the ledge.

"Are you all right, ma'am?" said the female cop who stayed behind, her hair wound tightly in a bun on top of her head.

I couldn't bring myself to answer.

"Ma'am, are you okay?" she repeated.

I looked up at her, clutching the seat of the stool tightly against my chest. She reached for the stool and placed it down beside me, motioning for me to sit.

"I'm fine," I mumbled.

"You're safe now," she said in a comforting voice.

Then I experienced a profound moment of truth. I realized I wasn't any safer working in this convenience store than if I was out in the world taking risks and making mistakes. This store wasn't *protecting* me from anything, but rather perpetuating my fear of failure and giving me an excuse to withdraw from the world.

At that moment, it all became clear to me, and I knew what I had to do. I had to deconstruct this image of myself working at a safe job that paid the bills. I was still young, so what the hell was I settling for? I owed it to myself to live my life on my own terms and find something to be passionate about. To find purpose in all of it.

I didn't want to be scared anymore of failing to become the person I wanted to be.

My mind started racing as I thought about what to do. First, I'd tell Ma that I wasn't going to work at this awful store anymore. I had money saved up, so we wouldn't be destitute, and I could still help out with the bills. Then I'd let Sophie know that she could talk to me about boys and school, and make sure she understood the opportunities she had in life. I would spend more time with Anne, too, and make up for all the times I wasn't there for her this summer because I was busy sailing with Henri.

Henri. I absolutely had to talk to him—no excuses this time. I would be straight with him and stop this ridiculous double life. He deserved to know the truth. Besides, what was the worst that could happen? It's not like he'd stop liking me just because I lied about a few details. I was still the same person, after all. I'd just sit him down and admit to telling him some white lies. And yes, I should have come clean about it sooner, and I was sorry for waiting so long.

Then there was Ben. At least with him I felt no urgency to right any wrongs. There was nothing I needed to fix with him. He'd been a great friend to me, and thankfully, I'd never lied to him about anything.

I suddenly felt free of restrictions, free of all the reasoning that had bound me to my decisions in life. A small opening in my chest grew like a warm fissure around my heart. It let out all the cold fear and filled back up again with hope for the future.

I felt energized from the new plans forming in my head. I asked the policewoman if I could leave the store, but she said I had to stay until Ronald arrived for questioning. I'd have to speak to him anyway to tell him I was quitting, so I didn't press her on it. Ronald would be livid, of course, since he'd just given me a promotion. He'd probably think I was raving from the robbery, but I'd tell him that it just had to be this way and to give my shifts to Aline.

Static crackled from the radio clipped to the policewoman's

shoulder. She acknowledged the call, and a voice came through with details on the pursuit.

"We're closing in on the suspect now...received a confirmed sighting of a man matching the suspect's description crossing First Avenue...he disappeared into a wooded, residential area... we have two patrol cars with floodlights driving the laneways... neighbours are cooperating."

The policewoman glanced at me, then turned and walked toward the loading door.

"The two witnesses are still giving statements here at the store," she said into the radio. "I'll report back once we've wrapped up."

A little while later, satisfied that I didn't need any medical attention, the policewoman ceased her hovering and permitted me to move freely around the store. I wished Ronald would hurry up and get here already so I could leave, but until then, I'd have to find something to do to get me through this final hour in this awful store. How quickly it had become unbearable with its nauseating smell of bleached floors and steamed hotdogs. I wanted nothing more to do with any of it.

As I walked over to the coffee counter, I noticed a small crowd gathered outside. The lights from the cop cars reflected off nearby porch windows, and it was attracting the neighbours.

I heard a cop at the front door say, "Sorry, gentlemen, you can't enter. This is a crime scene."

"Of course, sir, I understand your position. We wanted only to enquire about the nature of the incident at hand," said a voice that I recognized immediately.

Oh no, not like this.

"You see," Sean continued, "we were on the patio of Captain Dan's on the wharf—a lovely establishment, by the way—when we noticed the approaching police vehicles. And being that this is a rather sleepy town—no offence—we naturally had to come see for ourselves what was happening, as we could only imagine what violation of the law took place."

I barely had time to react. Henri stood beside Sean, just as eager to find out what had happened at the store to necessitate all the police cars, when he gazed momentarily over the cop's shoulder in my direction.

I stood exposed in the middle of the store, wearing my green apron and holding my extra-large coffee mug.

It took Sean a moment longer, but his eyes soon settled on me, too. The two of them stared blankly at me, perplexed to find me so out of context from what they were expecting. In the meantime, the cop relaxed and began sharing sparse details about the robbery, oblivious to having lost the attention of his audience.

"Odette?" Henri said in a strained voice.

I was speechless. It took all of my strength to look Henri in the eye, to witness the disapproving frown on his face. I could only imagine what he was thinking: confusion, disgust, anger. I realized it was only a matter of time before the universe forced this meeting upon us, and tonight was the night.

I took a deep breath and began the long walk toward him. Ashamed. I couldn't even bring myself to look at my passing reflection in the storefront window.

"Henri, I can explain."

I walked out the door past the cop, assuring him I wasn't leaving until I finished with my statement.

"Odette, what's going on? Do you *work* here?" Henri asked defensively.

"Please don't judge me," I pleaded.

"Judge you?" he said incredulously. "I've *never* once judged you, Odette. I've only admired you since the first day I saw you. I thought you were different from all the other girls. Different from anyone I'd ever met before."

He looked away, unable to meet my eyes, afraid of what I was about to reveal.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I'm still the same person, Henri," I said with conviction, feeling like I was losing him with each passing second.

"Please listen to me," I started again. "It's true that at the beginning, I let you make certain assumptions about me. But I never thought I'd see you again, so I didn't bother to set the record straight. You have to understand, Henri, I never thought that someone like you would be interested in someone like me for very long. And even as we spent more and more time together, a part of me always kept my guard up for the day you'd stop calling."

I looked pleadingly into his eyes, but he held in his emotions.

"The more I told those stupid stories about my dad and his boat, the harder it was to tell you the truth. It just always felt too late to fix it. I know it was wrong, and I should have said something to you sooner," I admitted.

Henri turned away, seemingly struggling between forgiveness and abhorrence.

I was losing him.

"Henri. You have to trust me. There were so many times I wanted to tell you that I work here and not at some boutique, that I live in a trailer park and not at the MacArthur's beach home. But every time I prepared myself to tell you the truth, I panicked and couldn't do it. I couldn't risk losing you..."

This was my final reprieve. I had nothing left to offer. I reached out for his hand, and he let me hold it, briefly.

He stared at me with glassy eyes, then said quietly, "I don't think I could ever trust you again."

"Yes, you can, Henri. Please, let me tell you everything you want to know."

He seemed to be teetering on the edge of a decision, and it made me believe there was still hope.

"Let me tell you what is true," I said. "I loved every minute we spent together sailing...and I love you, Henri."

Sean called out Henri's name and gave him a nod to get going.

Henri looked into my eyes and pulled his hand away. "I don't ever want to see you again."

His words pierced me, spilling out all the hope I'd been cultivating in my chest, the warm layers of promise slowly draining

out of me.

Sean walked up to his friend and patted him on the back. "I told you not to get involved with the locals. Come on, let's go."

Prodded on by Sean, Henri turned to leave but then looked at me one last time, and I could see the hurt in his eyes.

"You were the one...the one person I never thought would lie to me. But now I see you women are all the same. You'll do anything to snag a trust fund. You knew *exactly* what you were doing."

He turned and walked away, never looking back.

His words stung me like a sunburn—raw and tender when exposed. I closed my eyes to hold back the tears. I was emotionally drained from Henri, and the shock of the robbery finally hit me. My mind raced wildly, and I wrapped my arms around myself to try to control the shaking.

Only moments ago I had been filled with such hope for the future, but now all I felt was a weight too heavy to bear. Not only was my so-called career over, but I had lost my boyfriend and my self-respect all in the same night. How did this happen? All I'd ever wanted was a better life—to be free to make my own choices. But somehow I'd completely messed it all up. And worst of all, what kind of a role model was I being to Sophie?

From this point, I knew my life was forever changed. I was no longer the person I wanted to be. I was reverting to the family pattern of disappointments and deception. I was becoming Ma.

A cop cruiser pulled into the parking lot. It passed in front of me, and I saw Ted in the back seat, his eyes vacant and his chin smeared with blood. I backed away from the car in a daze. The cop parked the vehicle and then walked over to the policewoman who'd been standing by the door watching me.

"It's been one hell of a night," he said as he ran his fingers through his hair. "We found the suspect attempting to escape into the woods through the back lot of the old school. Used a floodlight to chase him down, but he made us work for it, running up to a parked car, where we pushed him against the hood to cuff

him. He got a little bloody, too. Bit his tongue when his head hit the windshield.”

“Geez,” the female cop said, taking a second look at Ted sitting in the car.

“So listen, about this parked car behind the school. I’m going to need your help with it. Inside were a male and a young female. She says it began consensual, but then he became aggressive. Sounds like attempted sexual assault. We got lucky with this one because the girl was so frightened I don’t think she would have ever reported it if we hadn’t literally run into the car during the chase. Can you take care of it?”

“Of course, I’ll talk to her,” the policewoman said.

“Great, thanks. She’s on her way here in the other car.” He pulled out his notebook and flipped through the pages. “Sophie Ange Leblanc, age fifteen, residing at 10 Oceanview Drive.”

I spun around to face the cops. I’d only been half-listening to them talk until I heard Sophie’s name.

“Sophie?” I said. “Is she okay?”

The policewoman who’d been mothering me all night held up her hand and said, “Calm down. There’s no reason for you to be concerned about this.”

“Concerned? I have every right to be concerned. You’re talking about my little sister! She needs me. She needs someone to look out for her,” I said through tears that I could no longer control.

The cop walked over to me and told me to sit and breathe deeply, saying I wasn’t helping anyone by being hysterical. She promised that I could see my sister as soon as they brought her in for questioning. I obliged, sitting on the pavement and letting my head fall between my knees as the weight of the world pushed me to the ground.

Just then an SUV screeched around the corner and pulled into the parking lot. The bright headlights burned into my retinas, but I didn’t blink. The sensation was mesmerizing, the way it must feel to be a deer caught in the lights, waiting to hear the deafening shot of the rifle.

Ronald stepped out of the vehicle and demanded that someone tell him what was going on with his store. The lead investigator spoke up and explained how Ted had held his co-workers at knifepoint before fleeing the scene.

“*Christ!*” Ronald spat, stomping the ground and balling up his fists like he wanted to punch the brick wall. “That little *shit!* I knew he was no good.”

I couldn’t help but let out a pathetic laugh, a defeated release of sorts, which startled Ronald, who hadn’t noticed me sitting on the pavement.

“Odette, *geez*, you look like someone took the piss out of ya. What the hell are you doing down there?”

Although I’d planned it much differently in my head, all I could say was, “I quit,” the words slipping off my tongue like water.

Aftermath

After six days of self-loathing and little attempt at personal hygiene, I decided it was time to get out of bed.

I'd had enough of waking each morning determined to start the day with a fresh perspective only to be overwhelmed by paralyzing, destructive thoughts. I was done with burying my head under the pillow and sleeping the day away only to wake in the middle of the night feeling alone and defeated.

In the waking hours, I brooded over how my life had irreversibly shifted in a frightening direction. I was jobless with no contingency plan, and I'd let down everyone that mattered to me.

I cringed at the memory of Henri's face that night at the store—the resentment he had for me when he walked out of my life forever. Even though I had tried my best to explain to him my side of things, why I behaved the way I did, it was too late. I had betrayed him like so many other girls before me, and he wanted nothing more to do with me. He didn't even say goodbye.

I spent an equal amount of time laying awake thinking of Ben, remembering our early morning talks on the beach and that last day we spent together on his boat after the storm. It had been almost a week since I'd seen him, and I could barely cope with the thought that he might have already left to start his next job.

I thought about Aline, too, and how worried she must be about me. She would be wondering what had happened to make me quit my job. We used to spend so much time together at the store, just talking and laughing. And I could always count on her to give me motherly advice when I needed it the most.

I regretted shutting Anne out of my life, too. I hadn't returned any of her phone calls because I knew she'd want details, and I just couldn't bear to relive the events of the past week. I hoped our friendship was strong enough so that she'd still be there for me when I emerged from my bedroom exile.

During the past week, the only person I had any contact with was Sophie. I let her come into my room to bring me food and water like tending to a stray puppy. But my neediness for her was only a ruse, an excuse to see her every day to make sure she was all right. After her ordeal that night in the car with André, I wanted to keep her close to me. The experience had changed her in subtle ways, and she was different because of it. And I was still trying to determine if it was for the better or not.

Thankfully, Ma had pretty much left us both alone, except for the few times she yelled through the door for me to do the dishes. Sophie had told her that I'd been given the week off after the robbery, so most likely she thought I was just being lazy. She probably didn't even notice anything was wrong since she was gone more than she was home.

I sat up in bed to steady myself before standing. It had come time to end my self-imposed quarantine. I was weak and overslept, but even through the fog I knew things were different today. To start with, it was daytime, and my internal clock celebrated the reconnection back to a natural human rhythm. And I also felt a renewed mental strength to once again face the day ahead of me.

Sophie must have heard me rustling the bed sheets, and she opened the door to peek in. "*Ça va?*" she asked nervously.

The fragile tone of her voice made me realize just how selfish I'd been all week. I'd withdrawn to my room like a pale ghost, making Sophie worry needlessly about me when all this time she was dealing with her own emotional turmoil.

I motioned for her to come in. "Don't worry about me. I'm better now—just needed some time to think things through."

She seemed hesitant, but I reassured her I was fine, and she jumped on the bed and gave me a hug. Her affection startled me,

reminding me of when we were kids.

"I'm glad you're here, Sophie. I've been meaning to talk to you."

"Me too. You first."

I breathed deeply and then said point blank, "Sophie, I'm leaving."

"*Oui, je sais*," she answered calmly.

"Really? But how could you know? I never said anything about it."

"Well, you've been acting kind of funny these past few weeks, and I just figured you had some big decision on your mind, and what's bigger than leaving home?"

Sophie's remark surprised me. All these weeks when I thought she was oblivious to the world, stuck in her teenage ego, she'd been quietly observing life around her. For the first time, I noticed a new self-confidence in my little sister that filled me with pride.

"Where will you go?" she asked.

"Honestly, I don't know. That's why I spent so much time in bed. I was trying to figure it all out, but it only made me crazy. I realize now that I have to just live my life and believe that everything will fall into place. You know—it can work that way for you, too."

"*Oui, je sais*," she answered, suddenly deep in thought.

Finally, she said, "I heard about this student work program being offered next summer. They give you a job working with kids in different cities across Canada. I don't know—it's probably stupid because I'd have to really study hard this year to get better grades—but I think I could do it. I could work and save my money and maybe be a teacher one day?"

She fidgeted with the corner of the blanket and then looked up at me timidly.

I was overjoyed with her news and reached out to pull her close to me. All this time, I was scared of making any kind of decision in my life that would leave Sophie alone and vulnerable without me. But here she was, bravely plotting out her own future.

Now that she had a plan for herself, I felt like I could finally move on with my own life.

"It's a perfect idea! And I have money to give you to start your tuition savings. You can do this," I said firmly.

"Really?"

"Yes, really."

"Do you *really* think I can do it?" she asked again, searching my eyes for reassurance, desperately needing encouragement.

"Yes, I really, really think you can do it. We LeBlanc women can do anything we set our minds on. You just have to believe in yourself," I said definitively.

"I believe," she said. "Plus, if you're leaving, then I definitely don't want to be the one stuck here looking after Ma. Plus, there are some other people I don't want to be around anymore. I just want to live my own life."

"I understand. You don't have to explain a thing to me."

"One more thing," she said with a mischievous smile.

"What?"

"You *really* need to take a shower." She hit me on the head with a pillow then ran out the door.

I got out of bed, and for the first time all week, I was ready to face the day. The world seemed full of possibility again. I crossed the hall to the bathroom and ran the shower. The steamy water felt soothing against my skin, and I stayed under it until it ran cold. When I returned to my room, I sat on the bed and stared at the phone. It was time to call Anne—no more postponing. The phone rang four times before she finally picked up.

"*Ouais*," she said flatly.

"*C'est moi*."

Silence on the other end. I knew I had to start with an apology before she would even consider listening to anything I had to say.

"I know I've been a terrible friend lately, especially this past week," I said. "I hope you can understand—I was just feeling miserable and needed to be alone. But the good news is that it worked. I'm up, showered, and done feeling sorry for myself."

She continued with the silent treatment.

“Can you forgive me?”

Finally, she spoke. “I thought you were dead! I can’t believe you never called me. I heard about the robbery. *Fuck*...everyone heard about that. I called you—I don’t know how many times—and stopped by the trailer, too, but Sophie said you were out. I didn’t know what to think. Christ, Odette, what the *hell* is going on with you?”

I was an awful friend and deserved her tirade. If she had ignored me like I did her, I would have reacted the exact same way.

“I’m sorry, Anne. You have to believe me—I didn’t mean to hurt you. I literally took a time out from everyone and everything. You wouldn’t believe what I’ve been through this past week. But now I need my best friend back.”

I waited for the sound of her voice.

After a heavy pause, she finally answered. “Of course, Odette, I’m still your best friend. I’ll be over after class...and you better fucking be there.”

I smiled into the phone as she hung up in my ear.

I dressed quickly, eager to be out in the day amongst the living. Standing in front of the mirror, I fiddled with my hair until finally deciding to leave it down around my shoulders. Then I frowned at the pale face reflected back at me in need of a day in the sun and a dose of clean air.

Out in the kitchen, I wasn’t at all surprised to find a stack of dishes on the counter and a pile of stale beer cans on the table next to a foul-smelling ashtray. My first instinct was to tidy up the place before leaving, but instead I walked straight over to the door and put on my shoes to go out. This was my first day of making decisions based on what I wanted to do, rather than what was expected of me, and I was beginning to like the new me.

I grabbed my sunglasses and purse from the table, yelled down the hall to Sophie that I’d be back in a little while, and pushed open the screen door to the bold, new world waiting outside for me.

I walked through the trailer park and down the laneway that led to the beach. My calf muscles cramped from a week's worth of inactivity, but I didn't mind. I couldn't stay one more day in my bed feeling sorry for myself. Being out in the fresh air made me feel alive again.

It was a beautiful, sunny day, and people were milling about everywhere. I kept to myself, walking along the edge of the water while kids squirmed around me to scoop up wet sand into their plastic pails. The ocean breeze blew small crests of water up to the sand bars, slowly dissipating back out to sea.

My mood was light and hopeful, even through my growing anticipation of nearing the end of the beach. Then as soon as I rounded the bend, I knew immediately Ben was gone. His converted sailboat was no longer in its usual spot, and the red dory was gone, too. He must have received the call he was waiting for and left for his next assignment.

It made sense, of course, that Ben was gone. It was selfish of me to think that he'd hang around town just to say goodbye to someone he hardly knew. Still, I was flush with regret. I longed to see him one more time so I could talk to him and have the world make sense again. I just wanted to be near him.

Warm tears fell down my cheeks, and I could do nothing to stop them. I wondered if Ben had walked up and down the beach with Snow the morning he left, looking for me to say goodbye.

I reached the end of the beach and wiped the tears from my eyes with my shirt, then climbed up the embankment to the road. To the right was the sailing club, but I willed myself not to look at it as I passed by. It brought back too many painful memories of Henri that were better left kept under the surface. I was pretty sure that he'd left by now, too, but I still felt humiliated by everything that had happened between us and wanted to put it all behind me.

Today I was plotting out my future, not reliving the past. Although so far, the day was not turning out the way I had hoped.

Then I heard someone call my name, and I stopped. Was I daydreaming? I started walking again but at a quicker pace.

“Miss Odette!”

I turned to see Gesner standing at the back door of the club with a mop in hand.

“Gesner,” I said, relieved, and walked up to greet him.

He looked the same as always with his crisp white outfit contrasting against his tanned skin. He squinted against the sun, smiling warmly and happy to see me.

“Haven’t seen you ’round much lately. You been hidin’ out on me?”

I shook my head. As usual, his perception was impeccable. “You know I wouldn’t do that to you, Gesner. It was more like I was hiding out from the world. I had some stuff to figure out, which forced me into a mild hibernation. But it’s all good now. I’ve emerged from the den ready to take on the world.”

He smiled kindly and patted me on the shoulder. “Been worried about you. I heard about the robbery. Were you workin’ that night?”

“Yah, I was there. It was strange, though, like being on a movie set. Like it wasn’t really happening to me.”

“I was afraid of that,” he said. “In the navy, when the boys got themselves tangled up in a battle, they’d git somethin’ called *shell shock*. We never talked about it back then. It wasn’t the thing to do. You just soldiered on like nothin’ was wrong. It wasn’t till later when the boys got sent home that they’d come undone.”

“I’ll be okay, Gesner. I promise.”

“I know you’re a strong girl, got that fishermen blood in you,” he said with a wink. “But even the best of us need a little help sometimes.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a chain of some sort.

“Been carrying this around with me all week waiting to see you. Had a feeling you might need it. I know it helped me through some tough times.”

He opened his hand to reveal a military dog tag. “It’s not the real thing,” he said as I reached for it. “It’s a replica. A friend gave

it to me once when I needed it, and now I'm givin' it to you."

I turned the tag over, and the inscription read *simplify the chaos*.

I stared at the tag and let the phrase imprint in my mind. There was so much depth to those three simple words. Gesner was trying to tell me something important—tune out the noise in my life and concentrate on what's important.

I was overwhelmed by Gesner's kindness. I sucked in my breath, blinking hard to keep from crying all over again, and reached out to hug him.

"Thanks, Gesner," I said and put the necklace over my head, letting it hang down the front of my shirt. "It's *exactly* what I needed right now. But of course, you already knew that."

He gave me a knowing smile.

"The robbery was bad and all, but in a way I'm glad it happened. It forced me to make a really important decision." I paused for dramatic effect, then announced, "I'm officially unemployed!"

"Well, well. Is Miss Odette gittin' ready to leave the nest?" he asked with a raised eyebrow.

Again, he had it all figured out even before I did.

"Yup, I guess you could say that, except I don't know where I'm going. Any ideas?" I asked, sure he'd have the answer for me.

"You'll be fine as long as you're leaving to go toward something, not running away from it," he said wisely, leaning on the mop handle.

"Right..."

"Oh—one more thing," he said, disappearing behind the door and returning with a delicate paper boat balancing in the palm of his hand.

"A young fellow left this for you the other day. He said it was important that I give it to you if you ever came by the club again."

He handed me the neatly constructed boat, and I stared at it, wondering who it could be from. One side of the boat had the numbers 48.8584 with an arrow pointing up, and the other side read 2.2946 with an arrow pointing to the right, next to 31.12.12.

It resembled a registration number, like all boats had painted on their side, but I'd never seen a boat with three numbers before. I was sure it was a clue, but I had no idea how to decode it.

My first thought was of Ben: Did he leave this for me after he couldn't find me on the beach the morning he left? Was it his way of saying goodbye? Did the string of numbers offer some way to stay in touch with him? Then my mind turned to Henri: Was it a note to say he'd forgiven me? Did he want to see me again? Was he coming back?

My mind raced as I ran through the possible scenarios.

"Those coordinates make sense to you?" Gesner asked.

"Coordinates? Um—sure," I said, a little confused, then placed the boat inside my purse.

Just then a crackle of feedback pierced the air from a loud speaker at the front of the building. The man on the microphone welcomed the crowd to the graduation ceremony for the youth sailing program. A group of giddy children waited in line to receive their sailing certificates.

"Do you have time to get a coffee with me?" I asked.

"Love to dear, but can't. I'm busy settin' out the chairs upstairs for after the ceremony."

"Next time, then," I said and waved goodbye.

I walked down the wharf, holding the dog tag in the palm of my hand as it dangled from my neck. I wondered how, exactly, to live up to its inscription about simplifying the chaos. I wasn't paying much attention to where I was walking when I felt a tap on my arm, and I looked up to see the lovely couple, Barney and Claudia, from the yacht club.

"Good day," the captain said as he tipped his hat courteously at me.

"Good day to you, too," I answered.

"How are you, my dear?"

"Fine, thank you. Beautiful day, isn't it?"

"Indeed," Barney said. "But there's a nightly chill now. You know what that means? Time to ship out and follow the snow-

birds south.”

“Right,” I said, aching aware that it was migration time. “When do you plan to leave?”

“By end of week, I suppose. We just need to tie up a few loose ends first,” he said. “We have a good crew. Plan to take our time stopping at ports along the way to pick up supplies and stretch our sea legs.”

“Plus, we buy plenty of books,” Claudia said. “You absolutely have to be an avid reader or else you could very well perish from boredom out at sea.”

“I hope we’ll see each other again before you leave,” I said. “Could I stop by the club later this week to say goodbye?”

“That would be lovely, dear,” Claudia said.

“Great, see you then,” I said and continued walking down the wharf.

I arrived at the restaurant and ordered a coffee to go. All around me were people strolling arm in arm, pushing baby strollers and laughing as their ice creams melted down their wrists. Everyone was every bit enjoying the beautiful sunshine, enjoying the last fleeting days of summer. A perfect day to get lost in the crowd.

I eventually made my way back home and was glad to find I had the place to myself. I still hadn’t told Ma that I wasn’t going back to work, and I was glad I wouldn’t have to do it today. I ate a bowl of corn flakes with watered-down milk and sat in the living room, reading yesterday’s newspaper. I felt for the dog tag under my shirt and grew calmer just knowing it was there.

I heard a knock and looked over to see Anne standing at the screen door. When she saw me, she came in and stood by the couch.

“What the *hell*?” she said.

“I’m sorry I was such a terrible friend these past few weeks.”

“*P’tit pute*,” she said sourly.

"I love you, too," I said and stood up to give her a hug.

She pulled back and looked me in the eyes. "How could I be mad at a face like that?"

Anne was making it easy for me to apologize, and that's exactly why she was my best friend.

"Okay, dish. What's going on with you, Odette?" she said, rummaging through her purse until she pulled out a bottle of peach schnapps. She unscrewed the cap, took a swig from the bottle, and handed it to me. I drank a mouthful, feeling the sweet burn all the way down my throat.

"I'm officially having a mid-life crisis," I answered and then belched.

"*Ben, franchement*...you're twenty-three," she said disapprovingly.

I rolled my eyes and flopped back on the couch, covering my face with my arm, and then sat up and tried explaining myself again. "I quit my job."

"So."

"So? So what am I supposed to do now? I have no source of income."

"Odette, get a grip. You'll find another job—a better one where you won't have to work nights or deal with greasy Ronald. Then maybe you'll be able to spend more time with your friends, like *me*, for Christ's sake. Listen, I don't see this as such a big deal."

"Really?"

"*Really*," she answered emphatically.

It was true. I was glad to be rid of the job for so many reasons, but I still couldn't believe that I'd quit without even having a backup plan. I sighed, and Anne looked like she was going to shake me.

"You know what I say—*fuck'em!*" Then she got a wild look in her eyes and jumped out of her chair and grabbed me by the shoulders. "*J'ai la solution!*"

She took me by such surprise that I jerked the bottle of peach schnapps, and the liquid sloshed down my shirt.

“What are you talking about,” I said, licking my lips.

“I got it *all* figured out!”

“Great, I’m dying to know,” I said sarcastically.

She paused as a big smile crossed her face. “Move out West with me and Roger!”

I just stared back at her with a stunned expression on my face.

That night, I dreamed I was out at sea in a little row boat. Stacks of paperback novels surrounded me, and I held a book in one hand while I oared with the other. I followed a series of markers in the water, like solar lights used in a garden pathway. The words on the page I was reading began to morph into a picture frame containing a sort of certificate in Latin script that read *simplify the chaos*. I flung the frame into the ocean like a frisbee and watched it spin around in a vortex of water before disappearing down a hole.

Then, from the very place where the frame sank, Sophie emerged as a beautiful mermaid and waved to me as she swam alongside the row boat. She moved faster than I was traveling and disappeared beyond the horizon. The crest of the waves sparkled under the light of the moon.

The next morning I sat in front of the television, drinking coffee and feeling a little desperate. I hadn’t seen Ma in days, and the pile of dishes in the kitchen was leaning precariously to one side. Plus, there was the call this morning from the phone company threatening to cut off our service, and I had to promise to pay the bill myself by end of day. Ma must have gone to bingo again and spent all the money I’d given her.

I remembered Anne’s proposal from last night to move out West with her and Roger, and I was feeling uneasy about the whole thing. It was a good idea, I guess—better than anything I’d come up with—but it made me out to be the third wheel. Plus,

the thought of going to northern Alberta sounded hopelessly cold and really far from the ocean. I tried to mull it over, consider the proposal from all angles, but my mind rejected the idea flat out.

Then I began to worry that I wouldn't come up with a better idea, and I found myself reaching through my shirt for the dog tag Gesner had given me. It calmed me to be able to hold it in my hand as a reminder to stop obsessing over things.

There were other loose ends contributing to my anxiety, and I knew I had to stop procrastinating and just deal with them already.

I reached over for the phone and dialed.

"Allô?" a little voice answered.

"Allô, Arif. *Est-ce que ta maman est là?*" I asked and heard him shuffling the phone.

"Allô?" Aline answered.

"It's me, Odette."

"Odette! How are you? I was waiting for you to come back to work, but Ronald said you were not coming back. Is this true?"

"Yes, it's true, and I'm sorry it took me so long to call."

"Are you afraid because of robbery? Ronald installed a new security system that will make a loud siren and automatically call police when you press a button hidden under counter. It is a very good thing."

I tried to think of the best way to describe to Aline that I couldn't bear to keep working at that store anymore, knowing it was the very place where she would likely continue to work for many more years to come.

"Yes, I am scared of going back to work. Scared of what I'll miss if I do. It's time for a change."

"What do you mean? Have you found a new job? But you just received a promotion. I do not understand," she said, confused.

"I don't have a new job *yet*, but I'm working on it. For now, I just wanted you to know that we won't be working together anymore, but I miss you already and hope we can stay friends."

"Oh, I see! This must mean you are to go into business for

yourself. There are two types of people in this world—those who make work and those who take work. You know my father was a businessman. Do not worry, little one, we will always make time to talk. I still have to fatten you up so you will meet a nice man and have many children!”

“Aline, you’re the best,” I said, but I was pretty sure she didn’t hear me because of the shuffling of the phone and the sound of a baking pan being pulled out of her kitchen oven.

Class

*I*t was turning out to be another beautiful, late-summer day and reminded me of all those mornings I'd spent decompressing on the beach after a long night shift. The sound of waves and the feeling of sand under my feet always brought me to a space where I could think, and the idea of it sounded good to me right about now.

I lay awake in bed for a while longer, staring out my bedroom window, until finally getting up and dressing in a sweater and jeans. In the kitchen, I boiled water for an herbal tea, something I'd picked up from Ben that morning together on his boat after the storm, and wrapped my hands around the warm mug as I stepped outside.

It was still early, and everything was calm. I noticed the sun rising over the sleepy cottages and heard the chirping birds and the flutter of insect wings. My mind began to clear as I walked and filled my lungs with the rich, salty air. Random patio lanterns and porch lights lit the way, the road dust still quiet with morning dew.

I fell in rhythm with the sway of the tall grass lining the back of the beach, as I navigated through the pathway. When I finally arrived at the beach, the full portrait of the ocean lay in front of me, and the waves washed in, one after another, over the sand.

I couldn't help but wish Grand-papa was here with me now. He would have known exactly what to say to help me figure out this mess I was in. I remembered the times when Grand-papa would find me stuck on a homework assignment and he'd say that

the answer was right in front of me. He'd point his finger to his eyes and ears and say, "Odette, you look but don't see, you hear but don't listen."

If he was right, then the answer to my future was already determined. All I had to do was find it. It could even be right here, right now on this beach, like a message in a bottle telling me where to find the treasure. I closed my eyes and concentrated.

Nothing happened.

My mind held no extraordinary answers. I opened my eyes, and everything was exactly the same—no sign from above, no random stranger handing over a clue, no paper airplane gliding in with handwritten advice on the wings.

All I saw in front of me was the wide, flat ocean. How could *water* be the answer I was searching for? I heard the hum of a motor and looked over to the wharf to see an early morning lobster boat making its way past the breakwater for a day of fishing. I watched as the boat sailed away, becoming only a speck on the horizon.

Was *that* my sign? The answer was right in front of me, I reminded myself.

So what was I supposed to do, get a boat and sail out to sea?

Sail out to sea.

Sail out to sea!

Suddenly, a flood of memories consumed me like flickering photographs. I remembered being young and laying on my bed with my hands behind my head, staring up at the map on the wall, daydreaming about travelling to the other side of the world. I remembered standing on the wharf and watching Grand-papa captain his boat out to sea and thinking that lobster fishing was the bravest job there ever was. I remembered how good it felt to go sailing with Henri and how the wind filled the sail and moved the boat so fast that I thought nothing could catch us. I remembered how every time I was out on the water I felt *free*.

Everything became clear. It was now obvious to me that I could no longer stand still at The Point. I had to leave for a place

that only the ocean could take me, to meet my fate head on. Grand-papa had known a similar fate. It was the briny blood in our veins that drove this thirst for adventure.

I became uncontrollably giddy, twirling round and round with my heels digging in the sand, my arms stretched out to my sides as I smiled up at the sky. Then suddenly, I fell to my knees as reality sunk in. There was a strikingly obvious problem with my plan: I didn't have a boat, and I didn't know how to sail. Maybe I hadn't gotten it right—misread the signs?

Regardless of my anxiety-fuelled doubt, it still felt like I was on to something, and I convinced myself not to give up so easily. I could talk to someone down at the yacht club about what to do. Maybe I could become crew, but I'd definitely need more practice out on the water for that. I could take a sailing class just like I'd seen those kids doing over the summer. I had enough money saved to get me started. I could even look for a cheap flight down south to catch up with the Canadian snowbirds who'd already migrated for winter. It was a jumble of ideas, but I was sure there was something there.

Overall, it wasn't a perfect plan, but it was the best course of action I had, and I was determined to see how far it could take me. Going south wasn't exactly achieving my childhood dream of travelling to the other side of the world, but it was a first step that would cut the cord between me and Ma—the hardest step of them all.

After spending the better part of the morning at the beach and considering all the things I had to do, I returned home to get ready to put my plan into action.

My first stop was at the bank, where I withdrew a thousand dollars. The teller handed me the money, and I held it tightly in my hand, staring at it with trepidation. I'd never held that much of my own money before, nor had I spent so much all at one time. My plan was to pay for a sailing class down at the club and use the rest to buy travel supplies and a one-way ticket out of here.

I carefully tucked the bundle of bills in an envelope in my

purse and reviewed the withdrawal slip to see the balance. The statement showed more than one thousand five hundred still in my account, almost all of which I would transfer over to a bank account for Sophie, so she could start saving for school to be a teacher. My plan was finally coming together, and it felt good.

My next stop was the sailing club, where I talked to the bartender, and he pointed me to an office upstairs. There I found a balding man in a white dress shirt sitting behind a computer desk.

"*Bonjour, Mademoiselle*, can I help you?"

"Yes, I'd like to learn how to sail. I mean—I know a lot about boats already, and I've been out sailing quite a bit this summer—but I'd like to learn enough to eventually take a boat out by myself."

"Good news—you've come to the right place," he said. "Bad news—we're not offering any more classes until next year. The season's over, I'm afraid."

I hadn't expected that. I assumed I would be able to just walk in and sign up for the next class.

"You mean, there are no more sailing classes being held?"

"Afraid not, but if you got the cash, you could always take private lessons. It's pricey, though, and I imagine you'll need quite a few of them if you want to be able to go at it alone. You lookin' for a certificate, too? Most skippers want to know you have the training before they'll hire you on their boat."

I felt slightly weak and slumped into the chair in front of his desk. Coming from the bank I'd been on such a high, thinking I had more than enough money to put my entire plan into action. I suddenly felt overwhelmed and couldn't stop the tears from rolling down my cheeks, and had to look away so the man wouldn't see me.

"Oh no, are you crying? Please, there's no need for that, my dear. *Tiens...*" He held out a tissue for me to dab my eyes.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to cry. I've had a rough couple of weeks, and I think it's just hitting me all at once," I said between sobs.

"Now listen, there's no reason to be upset," he said, fidgeting uncomfortably around the room before settling back behind his desk.

"Well, what would you do if you were me? I don't have the money to spend on expensive private lessons, and no one is going to hire me to work on their boat if I can't prove I know how to sail," I said, my eyes getting puffy.

The man caressed his bald head as he sat thinking.

"You don't understand," I said. "I don't have a Plan B. This was it. I don't even have a job to take me through the winter if I stay here."

Then I envisioned going to northern Alberta with Anne and Roger and being stuck inside all day by giant snowbanks and minus thirty degree weather, and I felt even worse. I let out a guttural moan as more tears fell.

The man had a pained expression on his face and finally offered, "Perhaps, there could be one other option..."

I looked up at him through teary lashes. "What do you mean?"

"*Maybe*—just this one time—I could bend the rules and let you enrol in the advanced sailing course for preteens. It's a two-week program, starts tomorrow after school and on weekends. Last one of the season."

The option of learning to sail with a bunch of kids was not my ideal scenario, but who was I to be picky. If the price was right, I'd do it.

"How much?" I dared ask.

"Um—let me see," he said, shuffling through some papers on his desk. "Four seventy-five plus tax," he said hesitantly, like I might start to cry again.

I did the math quickly in my head. It wasn't cheap, but it was an amount I could handle and still put the rest of my plan into action.

"I'll do it!" I said, jumping out of my seat and leaning over the desk to hug the man.

"Yes—okay, fine—now settle down," he said, urging me back

in my seat while he filled out the paperwork. “Just try to blend in if you can.”

I smiled triumphantly as I dug into my purse for the envelope of money.

As I left the club, I felt as if I might skip down the road like an excited child. It was as though a knot of stress had been whittled out of my shoulders now that I had a viable plan. Signing up for a sailing class was the first real step I’d taken toward my independence, and it gave me the confidence to keep moving forward.

What I needed now was to go home and study the map on my wall. I still had no idea where I would travel to, and no doubt the deciding factor would be tied to how expensive the flights were and the rules for passports and work permits. I had a lot of planning to do.

On my way home, I stopped by the bakery and bought a half dozen *pets de sœur* buns as a treat for Ma and Sophie—a sort of peace offering to soften the news that I was leaving. I hadn’t seen Ma at the trailer in days, which was a good thing because it gave me the space I needed to think. But the time had come to face her, and I couldn’t put it off any longer.

When I arrived home, I could tell Ma was in the kitchen from the banging coming out of the open windows. I hesitated outside the screen door, taking a deep breath before walking in. Ma was reaching down to retrieve a metal pan that had fallen to the floor. There was a mess of dishes on the counter that I now wished I’d taken care of before leaving this morning.

“Jesus, Odette!” she hollered when she saw me. “You think you can live in my home and put your shit all over the place?”

Admittedly, a small portion of the mess was mine, but the majority of it was Sophie’s and Ma’s. They blew in and out of the trailer like a gale wind with no concept of the destruction they left behind. Ma saw me eyeing the near empty gin bottle beside her, and I looked away so as not to irritate her further. I noticed a hap-

hazard pile of bills on the table next to a scribbled-on envelope.

I could tell Ma was in a mood, and it didn't help that I was late giving her the rent money. But that was only because I hadn't seen her in days. I realized that now was not a good time to tell her that her income-generating daughter was leaving. I had enough money left in my purse to hand over the rent, even though I had planned to spend it on myself. I could always go back to the bank tomorrow and dip into the money I was saving for Sophie.

"Sorry I'm late with the rent, Ma. I got it for you right here," I said, expecting her temperament to improve as soon as I handed over the cash.

Instead, she leaned against the kitchen counter and sneered at me with a dirty spatula in one hand and a gin and juice in the other. Her eyes were cold, and it confused me. I turned away from her and dug into my purse for the envelope.

"You think you're so fuckin' above everyone else," she said finally.

I looked up at her and wondered just how much she'd had to drink today. I'd only been in the trailer a minute and she was already accusing me of something.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"I don't know, sweetheart, you tell me," she slurred, lifting her drink to her mouth.

"Listen, I know the house is a bit messy. I'll take care of it," I said just to make her happy.

"Oh, really?" she said. "I thought someone like you might just hire a maid to do it. You know...since you got so much of your own *money*."

My mouth went dry. I felt like a caged animal being pushed to the corner. How did she know I had money? I never told her about my savings account. All she cared about was the steady flow of cash I gave her each month. She assumed I spent the rest of my pay on groceries and stuff for me and Sophie. I never told her any different.

Then something made me glance back at the envelope on the

table. I could see where she had written out a number roughly matching the amount of my paycheck, minus a bunch of other numbers that were probably bill amounts. Then she underlined a sum at the bottom showing what was remaining. Next to the envelope was a disconnection notice from the phone company.

Ma smiled at me contemptuously.

How long had she sat at the kitchen table, cigarette smoke swirling around her head, thinking of all the ways she could find more cash without having to work for it. Through her rudimentary calculations, she'd figured out that after all the bills were paid, I still had money left over at the end of the month. I could just imagine the conniving look on her face when she rechecked the numbers and found an untapped source of income in the family.

How quickly she had lashed out at me to save herself. I was *always* the one picking up the pieces when she messed up. She'd probably been broke for days, having gambled away her welfare cheque.

"Ma, if you need more money to pay the bills, I can get you some," I offered, trying to diffuse the confrontation as quickly as I could. The last thing I wanted was to get into any specifics about just how much money was in my savings account.

She glared at me like she had something to say but held back. She was giving me the silent treatment. It was all too much, and I couldn't handle being around her anymore so I gave up and went to my room.

When I reached the doorway, I stopped, frozen in place. Everything had been upended. The sheets were torn off the bed, and the mattress lay on the floor. My dresser drawers were pulled out and dumped on the desk, books were scattered across the floor with their covers ripped off, and my clothes were pulled from the hangers. The only thing left untouched was the map hanging on the wall.

I heard Ma coming down the hall behind me.

"What happened?" I yelled at her.

She stared at me menacingly. "You left me no choice."

I searched her eyes for meaning. "You did this...*why*?"

"I was trying to find your hoard of money because you sure as hell weren't sharing it with the rest of your family."

Her intrusion into my room—into my life—had gone too far. I was so upset that I wanted to smack her across the face, but I knew it would be something I'd regret. I willed myself to turn away from her so I wouldn't have to see her leathery face or smell her awful breath, and reminded myself that soon I'd be on a flight out of here and none of this would matter.

Ma was trying to provoke me, but I wasn't going to let her under my skin. She hadn't accomplished anything by tearing up my room.

I reached for the door handle to shut her out, but she stood in the way.

"I told you," I said through gritted teeth, "I can get you more money if you want it. Just leave me alone!"

She glared at me before walking back down the hallway. Her convulsive cackle sent shivers down my neck, and I followed her back out to the kitchen.

"Why are you laughing?" I demanded to know.

She ignored me, leaning against the kitchen counter and taking another sip of gin.

"What's so funny?"

She gawked at me like I'd just said something offensive, then she said dryly, "I don't need you to give me any money, dear. I've already got it."

The acid churned in my stomach, and I wanted to throw up. My heartburn was at the tip of my tonsils.

"What do you mean?" I asked, my voice quivering.

"Seems like all you gotta do round here is have a signed letter from your daughter saying you authorize your mother as a co-signer on your bank account," she said, quite pleased with herself. "Oh, and be extra nice to the bank manager, of course. Give him whatever he asks for," she purred with insinuation.

I put my hands on my forehead and paced back and forth

from the living room to the kitchen. I tried to rationalize the situation but felt only panic. My palms were sweaty, and my head began to ache.

"What have you done?" I screamed.

"*Jesus*, Odette, sometimes you're such a goddamn princess," Ma said as she took a drag from her cigarette.

I ignored her and kept pacing.

"This is your fault, by the way," she said. "Why would anyone leave money lying around in some savings account when it could be *invested*?"

"Invested?"

"That's right, like playing the odds."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Had Ma gambled away all of my savings? All of the money that represented five years of insufferable night shifts?

"Please tell me you still have my money? You couldn't have had it for more than a few hours," I whispered, barely able to hold it together.

"Don't worry, Odette. You know me—I'm a sure bet. This time I played the odds, and it's gonna pay off big time. I can feel it in my bones," she said with conviction, then did a little dance around the kitchen.

"What do you mean?"

"Let's just say we're off to the races," she answered smugly.

I hated to even ask her to explain. I didn't want to hear the words come out of her mouth, but I had to know.

"What kind of race did you bet on this time?" I asked, sinking down into the kitchen chair.

Ma took another swig of gin and eyed me like she was letting me in on a secret.

"Listen to this," she said. "I gave the money to Len, who gave it to his cousin who races greyhounds down in the States. Well, actually, he doesn't own any dogs himself, but he works in the sheds and tends to this one dog in particular, Maggie Maggie. He says she's been on a winning streak—hasn't lost a race in the last

six.”

She looked at me like I was missing the point. “Odette, Len’s cousin can make it so this dog wins. You understand what I’m saying?”

I stared at her like she was foreign to me.

She shrugged it off. “Len’s wiring him the money now. We’re all-in for Maggie Maggie’s big race tonight.”

I heard what she said, but I couldn’t bear for it to be true. All those years I’d spent working at the convenience store, staying only because my mother had wanted me to, staying because I was stuck and it was the path of least resistance. All those years paying attention to customers when I wanted to tune out, staying awake when I wanted to sleep, standing still when I wanted to run. All those years of no sunlight. Now, it was all for nothing.

Through glassy eyes I gazed at the calendar on the wall, remembering all the times I’d marked Win Day in one of those little boxes. All the times my sisters and I had jumped for joy, feeling like we were rich because we had pockets full of chocolate, only to be crushed when the money ran out a week later.

I knew there would be no Win Day this time. Ma spent her whole life chasing down false leads, and none of them ever came through. Even worse was her insinuation that she was willing to pay someone to rig the race at the expense of the poor animal that would run it.

Ma could see my anger boiling over. “Enough with the drama, Odette. We’re gonna win this time, I can feel it. Plus I gotta back-up plan.”

She reached into her tasselled purse and pulled out a thick roll of paper, unravelling it across the floor to reveal rows upon rows of Lotto 6/49 tickets. I dropped my head in my hands and cried for the second time that day. My money was gone and so was my chance to finally leave this place once and for all. None of it meant anything anymore.

One thing was true, though. Ma had irrevocably changed my life forever.

That evening I moved in with Anne. I couldn't stand to be home with Ma, and I had nowhere else to go. I was in shock and wrapped myself in a blanket on Anne's bed while she studied for her final exam. She fed me a can of beef noodle soup and sat with me until it was all gone. I felt weak and exposed, unable to cope.

I obsessed about money, counting and recounting the bills remaining in the envelope in my purse. The stack of crisp twenties from the bank was all the money I had to my name, and I would need all of it to try to rebuild my life. But it felt selfish to not give it to Sophie for school.

I could think of only two options: apply for welfare or get my money back from the sailing course. I was sure the man at the club would give me a refund, likely without a hassle if I told him it was an emergency, which quite frankly, it was.

When I told Anne about my plan, she accused me of panicking and making bad decisions. She would lend me whatever I needed from the money she earned from her part-time job in Moncton, and her folks said I could stay at the house until the end of the month as long as I helped out with the chores. When they learned I was enrolled in a class, they wanted to help me out just like they'd done for Anne while she was in school.

In the meantime, there was only one house rule I had to follow: Get up every day and stop feeling sorry for myself.

The next morning I dragged myself out of bed, despite being an unwilling participant in the day and preferring to remain comfortably numb. I did a load of laundry, showered and dressed, and mentally prepared myself for my first sailing lesson.

I left early to make sure I wouldn't be late for class and because I couldn't sit still with so many nerves firing off. When I arrived at the club, I gravitated toward the chattering group of kids standing on the dock. I saw the balding man at his office window, and he nodded his head when he saw me. I waved covertly, remembering that I was not to draw attention to myself.

I soon met Renée, our sailing instructor, who was a rather stout woman with a deep tan. She lined us all in a row and asked

our names. Thankfully, I was about the same size as some of the bigger kids, so I didn't stick out too badly. I did, however, get a few inquisitive looks from the boys standing beside me before Renée diverted our attention back to the lesson at hand. Soon we were all being asked to hoist imaginary sails with our hands, and no one paid any further attention to me.

For the rest of the lesson, we stayed on the dock, naming the different parts inside and outside the sailboat. The kids were excited, and it was fun being part of their energy, plus I knew a lot of the answers already, which made me look smart. All in all, it was a good first class, and I actually enjoyed myself.

The next day I arrived early with the idea of reviewing my notes before class. When I went to take a seat on the dock, I noticed Barney and Claudia sitting on the back patio, sunning themselves like a pair of old cats. I was glad to see them so I could say a proper goodbye before they left. I walked through the club to get to the patio, and for the first time I didn't feel like an impostor.

"Hi there," I said as I walked up to Barney and Claudia's table.

"*Bonjour, Odette!* What a lovely, lovely surprise," Claudia sang, turning away from the sun to get a better look at me. She was beautiful, as always, in a delicate pink top and a white brimmed hat that matched her silver hair.

"Ahoy!" Barney said. "Sit, sit, sit," he insisted and pushed out a chair from the table.

"Thank you," I said politely as I sat down with my study papers.

"What's all this, dear?" Claudia asked.

"These are my notes for sailing class," I said rather proudly.

"That's wonderful," she said, glancing over at Barney approvingly.

"But I thought you already knew all this stuff?" Barney said. "What about all the sailing you did this summer with that nice Livingston boy?"

"Um..." I said, as I looked away, trying to figure out how best to answer. "Let's just say I still have a lot to learn."

Claudia perked up and said, “If you’re trying to find work as a deckhand, I think anyone would be lucky to have you.”

“Thanks,” I said, blushing at her flattery. I wasn’t used to the encouragement.

We spent the remainder of our time together sipping iced lemonade and chatting about the beautiful cities Barney and Claudia had visited during their world travels. They spoke of Gothic churches in Barcelona, Porto wine cellars in Portugal, and seaside communities built into the cliffs along the South of France. I loved hearing their stories and hoped that I, too, would get a chance to see some of these places one day.

Class was about to begin, so I said my goodbyes and wished them well on their imminent departure. They, in turn, wished me luck with my course and promised to look me up next summer when they returned. We waved goodbye to each other, and I walked back inside the club to the classroom.

I sat in the last row of chairs at the back of the room in an attempt to be inconspicuous. But when Renée began teaching, I was the first to raise my hand to answer her questions, and I hung on every word she said. She spent most of the time describing different sailing maneuvers and drawing stick figure diagrams on the whiteboard, showing the steps to righting a capsized dinghy. For fun, we watched a video of the Volvo Ocean Race around the world so we could better understand the meaning of teamwork. I diligently took notes and vowed to review them again before going to bed.

1. *The five essential elements to sailing are: sail trim, centerboard position, boat balance, boat trim, and course made good.*
2. *A sailboat’s performance is determined by the efficient interaction of the main controls: hull balance and trim, sails, rudder and centreboard.*

3. *A boat is responsive to the wind and waves. Boats are more vulnerable to capsize from wave action than the wind when out at sea.*

The next day we learned about the wind and how light strips of nylon called telltales were sewn onto sails to determine if the main air stream was smooth or turbulent. If the sail was trimmed correctly, the telltales on each side would fly in parallel motion. The following day we examined how moorings were laid in rows called trots with heavy concrete sinkers or anchors to secure them to the seabed. Some moorings had a light pickup buoy, while others had a ring on top to which the boat was secured.

On the day we talked about weather and tides, I was completely intrigued. I compared the textbook explanations against what Grand-papa had taught me growing up. Fishermen around here knew what they knew from generational knowledge. There were simple rules that we all accepted as truth.

*Red sky at night, sailor's delight;
red sky in the morning, sailor's warning.
Rain before seven; clear by eleven.
Seagull, seagull, sit on the sand. It's never good
weather when you're on land.
When windows won't open and the salt clogs the
shaker, the weather will favour the umbrella maker.*

During the second week of class, Renée let us take out the boats. All the kids were giddy with excitement, including myself. We assembled along the dock like children in a school recess line. Displayed before us were seven Optimist dinghies used solely for the kids sailing program because they were small, single-hander boats with simple rigging. We paired up in teams and took turns

going out on the water while Renée followed behind us in another boat.

When it was my turn to sail, my partner steadied the boat as I stepped into it from the dock. I positioned myself confidently with one hand on the tiller and the other on the line. The wind caught the sail and, ready or not, I was off. It felt like I was riding a bullet gliding over the water, leaving a trail of smoke behind me. It was exhilarating to be all alone and completely in control.

Renée was close behind me, yelling out instructions. I trimmed the sail until it began to flap in the wind, then pulled back until it smoothed out again. When I found myself a ways out from shore, I grabbed the tiller and turned the boat toward the wind and managed to drift just enough to point the bow back toward the club. Then I swung the sail over to the other side to catch the changing wind. It snapped loudly, and the boat took off. I could feel the sideways force of the wind punching the sail, but the underwater keel resisted the pull and kept the boat righted.

When it finally sunk in that I was in control of the boat and steering back to the dock, I let out a yell, and my classmates jumped up and down, cheering me on. My hands still held on tightly, white in the knuckles, but I didn't care. I was sailing all on my own, and I felt as light as air.

For the remaining days of the class, I arrived at the club eager to learn and to sail the boat out on the water by myself. Each day brought me new skills and heightened my confidence. I grew stronger, my mind became less muddled, and I started to picture once again a plausible future for myself.

Finally, on the last day, I attended my graduation ceremony before a small crowd, and Renée presented me with my certificate. Anne cheered the loudest when they called my name. When the ceremony ended, I found her in the crowd, and she hugged me close to her.

"I'm so happy for you," she said with tears brimming in her eyes. Then she looked away and sobbed.

"Hey, c'mon," I said, trying to comfort her. "This certificate's

not *that* big a deal.”

“It’s not that,” she said, turning to look me in the eyes again. “Roger and I have decided to leave at the end of the month. I didn’t want to say anything till you were finished your course.”

She had made up her mind to leave. She would follow Roger to Alberta so he could find work as a laborer. There was really nothing I could say. If she hadn’t left first, it would have been me. It was just hard to face the reality that our lives were changing and that we’d grow apart. It was hard to say goodbye.

“I’m happy for both of you, really,” I said, as I wrapped my arm around her shoulder and we turned to walk home.

Then I saw a familiar couple walking toward me. It was Barney and Claudia. They must have been standing at the back of the crowd watching the ceremony. I was surprised to see them because they had left town over a week ago.

“Oh, congratulations, dear!” Claudia said, reaching out her hand to me.

“We’re very proud of you, Odette,” Barney said as he pulled his pipe out of his mouth.

“Thank you, but I don’t understand? I thought you left already?” I said.

“Well, yes, we did,” Claudia said. “We sailed as far as Nova Scotia when one of our crewmen learned of a family emergency, and we decided to turn back. Now we’re regrouping, so to speak.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said.

“Actually, we may have just solved our problem,” Barney said with a wink. “We’re looking for a new hand on deck, someone like yourself who knows her way around a sailboat. We set sail first thing in the morning if you’re interested...”

I was stunned by the offer. This lovely couple was willing to bring me with them on their next adventure, to take a chance on me that I could do the job. A million excuses raced through my head as to why I couldn’t go: it was too soon, I had to pack, I needed to say goodbye to everyone.

“I don’t know what to say...I couldn’t possibly leave so

soon...I don't even have my passport and—”

“Don't worry, dear,” Claudia said. “We'll take care of everything.”

I looked over at Anne. She had tears in her eyes, and at that moment I knew what I had to do.

I was ready to leave.

Flight

*I*t was the eve of my departure. I had just returned to Anne's house from a covert mission to the trailer to grab a few items to take with me and to leave a note for Sophie, telling her to meet me at the club tomorrow morning.

Anne watched me as I neatly folded my clothes and placed them in a duffle bag borrowed from Claudia. She handed me a bar of soap, a bottle of combination shampoo and conditioner, and a package of antinausea pills that she'd picked up for me at the drug store.

"Thanks," I said and fit them into the corner of the bag.

Anne sighed, and I knew what she was thinking. It was our last night together before we each set off on our own adventure, and we had no idea when we would see each other again.

"This is brutal," she said. "Let's go for a drink."

"I don't know. I'm leaving first thing in the morning and—"

"Come on," she interrupted. "This isn't a fucking funeral. Nothing a little rum can't fix, right?"

She was right. We should be having fun on our last night together, not standing around in mourning.

"Fine," I said, and Anne clapped her hands and eagerly jumped up to get ready.

Anne and I walked arm in arm down the boardwalk to the sound of waves splashing against the wharf pillars. Up ahead, the lights from the bar lit the way, and the evening breeze carried the sound

of music down the road and across the water. A line of fishing boats hugged the wharf, waiting for their morning work. Above us, the navigational Northern Star burned brightly in the night sky.

"I'm going to miss this walk," I admitted. "I don't know if there's a more beautiful place on earth, but I have to find out for myself."

"I know," Anne said. "Promise to meet back here someday?"

"I promise," I said, and we pinky swore on it.

We arrived at the bar and headed upstairs to find a seat. As usual, Vincent was working, and he looked pleased to see two familiar faces.

"*Bonsoir, les girls*," he said. "Out on a school night?"

"Actually," Anne said, "I'll have you know that I write my final exam on Friday. So it's an early celebratory drink for me, plus a farewell to our dear friend, Odette."

"Where you going?" Vincent asked, leaning on the bar.

At that moment, I realized I didn't actually know *where* I was going. I only knew that I was leaving in the morning on a boat with Barney and Claudia.

"I'm headed south. I'll send you a postcard," I said.

"Awesome," Vincent said, sounding genuinely pleased.

"Me too," Anne said. "I want a postcard from everywhere you land. Just send them home, and Mom will forward them to me."

"You're leaving too?" Vincent asked with a surprised look on his face.

"Going out West with Roger to find work on the oil rigs. The pay's better."

"I guess," Vincent said, seeming a little down. Then he stepped back from the bar and held out both hands. "So what'll it be, ladies? It's on the house."

"*Deux Coronas*," Anne said, and Vincent shot off to the beer fridge.

I glanced absently at the television mounted on the wall, broadcasting the evening news. It was footage of a ceremony

downtown in front of a large crowd. Then the camera focused in on a familiar face—Laurent. He stood tall and proud, while the mayor placed a medal around his neck and vigorously shook his hand.

“Turn it up, turn it up!” I yelled, and Vincent tossed me the remote from behind the bar.

“...as the mayor of Shediak, I hereby present you with this Medal of Bravery for your courage during the armed robbery at your place of employment, and for your valiant efforts that led the police to capturing the assailant. I am proud of you and hold you up as an exemplary citizen in our community.”

The camera zoomed in on Laurent’s humble face. He lifted his eyes to look out at the crowd assembled in the park, everyone in attendance to honour him. The mayor patted him on the back, and the people clapped. Laurent looked down at his shoes, then lifted his dark eyes again, looking out into the faces of the people. For the first time, in all the years that I’d known him, a trace of a smile formed on his lips, and then his teeth flashed a beautiful smile across his face.

Anne put her arm around my shoulder to comfort me as my eyes began to water.

The next morning Sophie met me at the club to say goodbye. I couldn’t bring myself to go to the trailer again with Ma there. I needed a long break from her and hoped that in time, I could forgive her.

Sophie ran up to me when she saw me standing on the dock. “Hey, sis.”

“Today’s the big day. Soon it’ll be your turn,” I said.

“Which one is your boat?”

“That one over there at the end,” I said, pointing down the dock.

“The one called *Liberté*?”

And for the first time, I noticed the name painted on the side

of the boat.

“*Oui...Liberté*,” I said, smiling to myself and feeling surer than ever about my decision to leave. Then I turned back to Sophie.

“*Écoute moi*, I want you to concentrate on school while I’m gone. If your marks are good enough, then you’ll have no problem getting into the student work program next summer. And just to make sure you stick to the plan, I want you to take the map off my bedroom wall and bring it into your room. Put a pin in all the cities you want to visit. Then every night before you fall asleep, think about those places and make it your goal to get there one day.”

“Nah, I don’t need it. I got Google Maps,” she said sarcastically.

I rolled my eyes, then said, “Seriously, I want you to move the map into your room because I’ve hidden something for you behind it.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a start on your tuition money.”

Her eyes widened. “No one would ever find it there, not even Ma.”

“Precisely,” I said and gave her a final hug goodbye. “Can you do one last thing for me?”

“Sure, anything.”

“Give Natalie and the girlies a hug goodbye for me, and tell them I’ll send postcards.”

“I will,” she said with a forlorn expression. Then she turned and walked away, hands in her pockets, kicking at stones as she walked across the parking lot.

Claudia called me to the boat, but I still had one more goodbye to do before we left. I ran into the club and asked the bartender if he’d seen Gesner around, but he said it was his day off. I reached for the dog tag around my neck, trying to keep my emotions intact. I wished more than anything to see him one more time to say goodbye, and to tell him how much he’d helped me through the madness of the past few weeks.

Claudia was waiting for me when I returned to the boat, and she reached out her hand to help me aboard. Barney had already started the engine and stood by the captain's wheel. John, the other deckhand who I'd met earlier that morning when I dropped off my bag, stood at the side coiling rope. He seemed nice enough—a bit serious, though—and I hoped we would get along.

As we pushed off from the dock, I walked to the back of the boat for one last look at The Point. The wharf was slick with morning dew, and the fog clung to the shoreline. I saw the big rock on the beach and remembered all those mornings I'd sat up against its cool surface, watching the sun rise while daydreaming. A flock of gulls landed in the water near a buoyant patch of seaweed. I felt homesick already, thinking of how much I'd miss this life—this predictable, familiar, lovely life.

Someday I'd return, but for now I had to go. There was no turning back, only forward, looking to the future. This is what I had always wanted—this chance to fill the empty space in me.

Just as we passed the breakwater, I glanced one more time at the club and saw a man appear with a little girl in pigtails trailing along beside him. Gesner! They walked to the edge of the dock and looked out toward the boat. Then they both waved at me, and I waved back enthusiastically with both hands. The little girl pointed to the tall mast on the boat, and Gesner knelt down beside her, seemingly explaining the mechanics of the sail to her. I watched them until their silhouettes faded into the muted landscape.

We sailed for five days, and I loved every minute of it. Barney was an excellent skipper and very patient with me while I learned his ways. I could tell he made John do the heavier work and saved the lighter tasks for me. I didn't complain. It gave me more time to sit with Barney and read over the maps and chart the course.

In the evenings, Claudia shared her books with me, and we sometimes played board games to pass the time. She also taught

me how to cook and grow herbs in window boxes—an idea completely novel to me. Never had I tasted so many different flavours or smelled such savory foods.

Late each night before bed, I would find myself alone and I'd gaze out the porthole in my room to find the Northern Star. I'd say goodnight to Grand-papa, recalling all our happy times together when we'd sit on the wharf and talk for hours about boats and lobsters. I hoped he was out there, somewhere, proud of me.

On day six we passed parallel to Bermuda, and I brooded over Henri. I pictured him sitting in his luxurious home, surrounded by beautiful people, living his rich life. I was still hurt and embarrassed about how it had all ended that night at the store, but I suddenly realized that maybe Henri had been right all along. Maybe I wasn't really in love with him, just intoxicated with how he could offer me an easy way out of my ordinary life. Regardless, I now knew that it could never have worked between us. Our worlds were just too far apart.

I searched through my bag until I found the photograph I'd taken of Henri, Stella, and Sean on our first sail together around Shediac Island. That was the day I learned there was more to life than the small existence I'd carved out for myself—that I wasn't crazy for wanting more. I would be forever grateful for these unlikely summer friends and what they had taught me that day.

I went up to the deck and stood alone at the back of the boat. The wind blew my hair over my face like the wash of memories I kept in my mind. I took one last look at the photograph and then let it go—watching it flutter in the wind and settle on the crest of a wave.

Over the next two months, we sailed south through the Caribbean and along the coast of Venezuela en route to Brazil. I witnessed the most amazing sights, like monkeys in palm trees and pods of dolphins racing alongside the boat. We sailed past isolated communities, where children ran along the shoreline, laughing and

waving at us. The excitement of what to see next made me wake early each morning and stay up late each night for fear I might miss something.

I bought postcards from stops along the way so I could send my news back home. I sat alone at the bow of the boat, writing stories to Sophie, Natalie, Anne, and even one to Vincent, telling them I was having the adventure of a lifetime.

As the weeks passed, my hair bleached in the sun and my skin turned golden brown. I felt healthy and alive. Working the rigging on the boat had toned the muscles in my arms, and whenever we docked I would go for a brisk walk along the beach or through the city, to stretch my legs and exercise my lungs. I made sure to see everything I could before setting sail again.

When we arrived in Rio, we stayed only long enough to prepare for the next leg of the trip to Cape Town, South Africa. Claudia and I shopped for food and supplies, Barney bought new charts and maps, and John made light repairs to the boat. We stocked up on new novels to read and even bought a Portuguese version of *Monopoly*.

The journey to Cape Town was long, and the weather was bad. We spent many nights holding on to the handrails as the boat churned in the waves, and I was thankful for the antinausea pills Anne had given me. It was nerve-racking to be out in the rough ocean, but I trusted Barney to get us through the storms. We received strict instructions from the Coast Guard to stay on course, and I made it my job to help Barney check our position as we could afford no mistakes.

Thankfully, after days navigating an uneasy sea, we arrived at our destination a little shook up, but altogether safe. It had been a weary crossing, but it felt like a test I needed to pass. I knew I was stronger and wiser for the journey, and could say that I officially earned my sea legs.

Reaching Cape Town marked a significant point in our journey. We would stay for several weeks to rest and consider the remainder of the trip. Barney set us up in a hotel and paid me

and John the rest of our earnings for our work on the boat. I was happy to finally have money in my bank account again. I could repay Anne for the loan she'd given me when I so desperately needed it, and I could start buying souvenirs for me and Sophie.

Everyone was eager to get off the boat. We needed to stretch our dormant muscles and go our separate ways for a few days. Being in such tight quarters with the same people week after week was physically and emotionally exhausting.

When I arrived at my hotel room, I threw my duffle bag on the floor and flopped on the bed, breathing in all the space around me. I still felt like I was gently rocking in the waves and figured the sensation would take at least a few days to work its way out of my system. Regardless, I nestled the pillow under my head and fell into a peaceful sleep.

I awoke sometime later that evening to a dark room and the sounds of the street market outside. I yawned and stretched out my arms while my stomach growled from not having eaten anything since the morning.

I got out of bed and walked over to the narrow balcony, parting the curtains and walking barefoot onto the warm, stone tiles. And that's when I realized I'd be spending Christmas in Cape Town.

The city was bathed in festive scenes and lights. The old stone facades of the buildings were decorated with strings of white and red bulbs that reflected off the water. Angels and large wreaths hung on lampposts around a big Christmas tree in the town square, all bathed in white lights.

All around, people and scooters moved through the backstreets, weaving in and out of merchant stalls and food shops. I heard street musicians singing Silent Night accompanied by someone playing a xylophone. Out in the distance, charter boats ferried up and down the waterfront as tourists snapped pictures of the scenic view.

Never had I felt more proud of myself. Here I was, a girl from Pointe-du-Chêne, New Brunswick, standing in a hotel room in

South Africa. I'd made it to the other side of the ocean just like I always dreamed I'd do someday. Finally, I'd accomplished something significant in my life.

I began unpacking my things when I noticed a summer dress that I hadn't yet worn. There was never any occasion to wear it while I was on the boat, but reaching Cape Town seemed like a good enough excuse. I brought the dress into the bathroom to let the steam from the shower work out the wrinkles.

After my shower, I felt renewed and ready to go out and explore the town. I slipped into my dress and a pair of sandals, and then braided my hair, moisturised my windburnt face, and even wore mascara. After one last inspection in the mirror, I grabbed my purse and headed out the door.

As I walked down the hotel hallway toward the elevator, I suddenly stopped to check my purse before I went any further. I had to make sure it still contained the paper boat that Gesner had given to me before I left. I unzipped the side pocket and found it there, flattened but safely stowed, just where I'd left it the last time I looked at it.

The note had been a mystery at first, but it didn't take me long to decode it once I realized what it was. After hours spent with Barney on the boat, pouring over maps and charting our course together, I realized that at least two of the numbers were latitude and longitude directions, and the arrow pointing up meant north and the arrow pointing to the right meant east. That left the third number, which stumped me for a while until I figured out that it was a simple calendar date. When I finally put the three numbers back together again, it all made perfect sense.

There was no ignoring the message now. It had come time to finally do something about it.

Cape Town bustled with tourists and street vendors, and I fell in step with the crowd moving toward the pier. It was dark outside, but the lampposts created warm pools of light on the boardwalk. I walked up to the corner of the pier and looked out at the horizon, seeing only white and red blips of lights indicating the

late arrival of ships. Behind me were the sounds of people laughing and eating in the open-air restaurants.

I put one leg up on the greasy timber railing and peered over the edge. To my surprise, on the inside corner of the wharf was a dory. I stared at the boat as it lurched in the foot-high waves and smiled to myself as it brought back so many memories of home, and of Ben.

I pulled the paper boat out of my purse, the paper now soft from all the times I'd opened and closed it. I read the numbers one last time.

48.8584N 2.2946E 31.12.12

Eiffel Tower, Paris, New Year's Eve

Yes, I was ready to take that trip now.

*Something there was in her life incomplete,
imperfect, unfinished,
As if a morning of June, with all its music
and sunshine,
Suddenly paused in the sky, and, fading,
slowly descended,
Into the east again, from whence it late had arisen*

*Sometimes she lingered in towns, till,
urged by the fever within her,
Urged by a restless longing, the hunger and
thirst of the spirit,
She would commence again her endless search
and endeavour.*

An excerpt from *Evangeline: A Tale of Acadie* (1847)
by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

About the Author

STACEY (DAIGLE) ATKINSON was born and raised in rural Taylor Village, a small community on the fringe of the Acadian village of Memramcook, New Brunswick. She lived there with her mother and sister in an old farmhouse with a pack of cats and acres of land for roaming. She spent summer weekends with her father in his hometown of Pointe-du-Chêne, eating lobster and hanging out on the wharf. You can find out more about the author and follow her blog at www.StaceyDAtkinson.com.



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ODETTE LEBLANC is promoted to night-shift supervisor at the local convenience store, but at the age of twenty-three, she already feels like her life has become a predictable routine. That is, until she meets a mysterious doryman and his cat on the beach, followed by an unexpected run-in with an American sailor. Each man will undeniably change the course of her life, and so will the selfish actions of her bingo-addicted mother, an impressionable younger sister, and a team of damaged co-workers. Their stories weave together throughout the book only to unravel in a mess of lies, betrayal, and missed opportunity that will leave Odette to face an uncertain future.

Set in the picturesque Acadian fishing village of Pointe-du-
New Brunswick, *Stuck* is an emotional journey about redefining
important in life and staying true to yourself.



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